

Sissy Helff, Nadia Butt (Eds.)

‘Tantalizing Alice’

Approaches, Concepts and Case-Studies  
in Adaptations of a Classic

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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# **‘Tantalizing Alice’**

## **Approaches, Concepts and Case-Studies in Adaptations of a Classic**

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in Adaptations of a Classic /**

Edited by Sissy Helff, Nadia Butt.-

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Frankfurt am Main, April 2016

Sissy Helff and Nadia Butt



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## Introduction

Sissy Helff and Nadia Butt

Lewis Carroll's timeless classic for children *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) seems to serve as the foundation for several inspiring works in different cultures around the world. Having been adapted directly into other forms of media, Carroll's Alice seems to go on 'travelling' in various guises as this anthology seeks to demonstrate. In fact, the waves of Alice-inspired works do not appear to slacken even today as evident in a variety of "mediascapes" (Appadurai 1996, 35), which uniquely show 'Alice at large' against a distinct, vibrant setting. For examples, if we just pick one literary media, namely novel, we notice that a significant number of contemporary novels like Anna Patrick's psychological novel *Meditations in Wonderland* (2015), Melvyn Simpson's science-fiction *Alice Through the Quantum Glass* (2013), Bryan Talbot's graphic novel *Alice in Sunderland* (2007), Wolfgang Zuckermann's critique of modern consumerism in his short novel *Alice in Underland* (2000), to name but a few, are deeply preoccupied with re-imagining the character of Alice. Such a conspicuous presence of Alice on the global cultural landscape confirms the fact that artists, writers and scholars feel the need to re-invent Carroll's character to re-write their stories. It might be due to the book's miraculous setting and its vividly portrayed characters that Alice and the White Rabbit tend to find their way into the bedrooms of our very young and of those grown-ups who still enjoy being intrigued by Alice's magical world. The great many variations of the Alice in Wonderland fantasy circulating in an increasingly globalised memory market bring home to us that some stories obviously never reach an expiry date. Indeed such an observation confirms what Paula Hamilton and Graham Huggan have postulated for folk legends, namely that the many interpretations of old stories point not just to the durability of a legend or tale, but also to its continuing profitability as a global fantasy circulating within an increasingly globalised cultural industry. Following this train of thought, this collection of articles seeks to scrutinize adaptations of Lewis Carroll's classic in literature, graphic novels, cartoons, film, theatre, circus productions, pictures and video games from around the world.

While scholars in German speaking countries prefer utilizing the concepts of intertextuality and intermediality in order to describe the medial translation of literary texts into different media, English-speaking scholarship regularly choose the concept of adaptation over the latter two (Krämer 2011, 207). Common to all approaches, however, has been a comparative approach in which the adaptation is only being read in the light of the original text, and one result of this approach is the prevailing fidelity criticism (a comparative approach faithful to the source novel) which, as A.R. Fulton already emphasized in 1977, frames all debates on adaptation in such a way that most

[discussion] of film based on a novel ... arrives sooner or later at the comparison of the film with its source. This kind of criticism may have its advantages. But somehow it leads to the mistaken conclusion that the excellence of the film depends on similarity to the novel ... from which it is adapted (Giffin 2011, 113-114).

Sarah Cardwell also stresses this point in her 2002 study of literary adaptations for television dealing with classics such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) (51). While in her study Cardwell opts to introduce a new methodology, she nevertheless foregrounds the idea that it is essential to first explore the manifold dimensions and meanings of adaptations before scholars can convincingly propose alternative non-comparative approaches (ibid. 9). Cardwell's research is thus interested not so much in interpreting adaptations but in "conceptualizing adaptations as the cultural form and [the] ontological problem they constitute within theories about adaptation" (ibid. 10). The historically dominant fidelity criticism, in contrast, tends to focus on an investigation of the process of adaptation when exploring the way an adaptation retells the same basic narrative as its source book.

While at first sight it might appear awkward not to present a reading of the original text in our anthology, this omission structurally suggests a rethinking of the connection between 'source texts', intertexts and newly established 'full texts'. Accordingly, the collection is committed to an extensive discussion about the relation between selected adaptations and other intertextual and intermedial modes of representation. Furthermore, contained here are articles which critically negotiate medium-specific models of adaptation having considered the limitations of the models. It is this broadened approach which emphasizes a need felt on our side for a critical intervention in the field of adaptation studies. This has led to the central aim of the book which is to provide a space for a comparative interdisciplinary discourse reflecting on the specificity of the material discussed and embracing the distinct modes of representation of each respective Alice story, picture or song. At this point it might be interesting to bring in Lucia Krämer's work on adaptation, because she draws our attention to the still influential romantic notion of the genius which, as she argues in line with Rainer Schulze (2011, 25-49), flares up in the close semantic relation between authenticity and adaptation and the idea of authorship and authority. The authority of the source text's author, she argues, is not only central to the narrative sphere but also important when discussing an adaptation's faithfulness to the original. Krämer explains that authenticity and adaptation, authorship and authority are semantically embedded in a connotative system that stresses the importance of obedience and respect. It is this particular semantic relation that finally unfolds a double bind, for adaptations are considered less original if they simply reproduce their source texts, yet they are accused of being highly unfaithful if they present free interpretations of and fresh takes on their sources (Krämer 213). This explains why adaptation studies, caught in this methodological dilemma for a long period, somewhat indistinctly shifted to and fro between literary and film studies, unable to make a home in either of those disciplines.

Linda Hutcheon reminds us, "Adaptations are everywhere today: on the television and movie screen, on the musical and dramatic stage, on the Internet, in novels

and comic books, in your nearest theme park and video arcade.” (2006, 2). It is especially true as “art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (Hutcheon 2006, 2). However what makes every adaption unique and distinct is that all adapters relate stories in their different ways. By using different ways of repeating stories is what makes adaptations an art in itself. Hutcheon, therefore, claims:

Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying. (2006, 7)

Since adaptation is believed to be rewriting and refashioning the original that it is a form of remediation, a form of translation from one medium into another. Hutcheon therefore declares adaptations to be “re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)” (2006, 16).

Jay Bolter’s and Richard Grusin’s groundbreaking book *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999), whose title refers back to McLuhan’s classic *Understanding Media* (1964), has put forward the concept of “remediation” to describe “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (1999, 273). Bolter and Grusin argue that “all mediation is remediation,” that “each act of mediation depends on other acts of mediation. Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other – a process integral to media (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 55). Remediation according to Bolter and Grusin is characterized by its “double logic”, its oscillation between “immediacy” and “hypermediacy”, transparency and opacity (cited in Erll and Rigney 2009, 3), between creating “the experience of the real” and “the experience of the medium” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 71). Bolter and Grusin highlight the fundamental correlation between newer and earlier media, arguing “no medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces” (1999, 15). In light of this thesis that medial practices do not occur in isolation but in a constant dialectic with other media, Irina O. Rajewsky underlines the role of intermediality as she points out that remediation can indeed be “classified as a particular type to intermedial relationship,” adding that “Just as the concept of intermediality on a more general level, ‘remediation’ allows to subsume under one heading the most heterogeneous instances of a widespread cultural phenomenon” (2005, 64).

Astrid Erll has yet another perspective on remediation. According to Erll, “Remediation and premediation go hand in hand” (Erll, forthcoming). Because the practice of remediation of an event or a classic invites us to reflect on what came before that, it hence encourages us to take into consideration the larger cultural context as well as the timespan. For Erll, remediation refers to the medialisation and transformation of stories and images over decades and centuries in different contexts (2012, 111). Erll explains, “Medial representations [...] function according to different media

specificities, symbolic systems and within ever changing sociopolitical constellations (2012, 131).” Hence, adaptations can be read as a form of re- and premediation.

In fact, adaptations, whether considered in relation to pre- or remediations, seem to remain a disputed terrain as pointed out before. Despite being a significant field itself, it has taken long until scholars are ready to acknowledge it as important an area as other forms of creative expressions. Given that one major adaptation studies scholar, George Bluestone, published his groundbreaking study *Novels into Film* in the late 1950s, it has taken the field a further fifty years or so to receive the attention it has deserved from the humanities. While the mid-1990s signaled a paradigmatic change which aimed at opening up the field by drawing our attention to filmic adaptations and to adaptations mediated through other media such as opera, ballet, comics and video games (Hutcheon 2006, 3-4), it is only recently that scholars have started to revise the field in such a way that adaptation studies can be considered an ‘independent’ research area. In her article “Fidelity, Simultaneity and the ‘Remaking’ of Adaptation Studies”, the London-based Lindiwe Dovey emphasizes the critical potential of adaptation studies as a discipline since its methodologies help us “to see not the so-called originality and genius of singularly unique works of art, but the contingency of art, and the need to explore the ways in which, and for whom, aesthetic value is created” (2012, 163). The US-based scholar, Thomas Leitch, follows Rick Altman’s line of reasoning (1999) and suggests thinking adaptation against the backdrop of genre conventions. Leitch believes that “there must be textual markers that identify adaptations as such” and which then “invite audiences to recognize them as adaptations” (2008, 108). Following these trains of thoughts this collection dealing with *Alice in Wonderland* adaptations hopes to demonstrate that Richard Hand and Katja Krebs were right when they courageously claimed in the editorial of the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* (1.3; 2008, 173-175) that we are on the verge of a new and exciting period which celebrates adaptation studies as a discipline in its own right.

This perception is reinforced by the collection’s opening article. In “Adaptable Alice” Thomas Leitch foregrounds the relationship of Carroll’s fictive creation to adaptation studies by highlighting how adaptation studies has often concerned itself with “the alleged unadaptability of texts.” However, Carroll’s Alice, as Leitch argues, offers an example of the opposite condition, which the author terms “hyperadaptability,” and which adaptation studies have so far taken far less note of. The range of different adaptations of the Alice books sees them identified as a hypotext, so the author analyses the nature of the interpretations that emerge from Alice’s use as a model in works ranging from wedding-themed parties to x-rated adult movie adaptations. In

In “‘The glory and the freshness of a dream:’ Jonathan Miller’s TV Play *Alice in Wonderland* (1966)” Andrew J. Gravel offers a reading of Miller’s TV adaptation of Carroll’s book that argues for its closeness to the 1865 work than any subsequent cinematic adaptation due to its focus on the hallucinatory realism of the original. In facing the reality of growing-up and into the inanities of Victorian adulthood the film transmogrifies that reality thus echoing the spirit of the original, allowing the viewer to “see

them in fresh and unexpected ways, just as a dream takes the stuff of our waking world and gives it back to us in strange new forms we could not have anticipated.” While fidelity criticism and adaption practices almost appear as immanent force within critical discourse, speculations about the connection between Carroll’s life world and his imagination of the Alice character is particularly powerful in connection with his Wonderland books.

“‘No One Can Keep Their Hand Off Alice’: Alice, the ‘Carroll Myth’ and Bio-fiction” sees Eckart Voigts trace the consequences of the biographical speculation that at times overwhelms the critical reception of Carroll’s works. The contemporary fascination with the “unsavoury ‘underground’” of the relationship between Carroll, Alice Liddell and Alice has led to repeated attempts at countering these interpretative tendencies, so the author argues “that Carroll’s fiction is infused with, inseparable from, and even perversely dependent on, this kind of biographical speculation.” While the call continues for adaptations to explore a perceived darker Wonderland, there is equally a “call for the reader to disentangle the merged textuality of Victorian and contemporary – to become a Neo-Victorian hermeneutician.”

Anna Kérchy picks up on this theme in “Alice’s Eroticized Adventures on the Other Side of the Looking-Glass” to explore the “paranoid, (post)modernist, post-Freudian compulsion to seek a subtext of sexual deviation” in interpretations of Carroll’s works that the author deems utterly misleading. By looking instead at the links between Nabokov’s translation work and Irigaray’s feminist model of sensual perception, the author seeks to “relocate our speculations about the emotional, erotic relations between Alice and Carroll in the new context of an amorous, co-dependent union of story-teller and listener.”

In “Favourite States of Nothing-On: Lewis Carroll and the Mortuary Wonderland of American Photography” Georgiana Banita attempts to “decode Alice adaptations in American photography as driven by a desire for a realm of intuited violence and brutal (if playful) fragmentation of the self, an otherworldly realm separate from life itself.” Concepts of the child and the mortuary functions of photography help bring to the fore a theoretical envisioning of maturation and constructions of selfhood and the intertextual relationship between these motifs as they appear in Carroll’s works and their manifestation in photography by Anna Gaskell, Francesca Woodman, and Annie Leibovitz.

Emily R. Aguilo-Perez’s argument ultimately confirms Banita’s critical reading of American Alice photography, when Aguilo-Perez argues in “‘I – I’m a little girl’: The New Adult in Film Adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland*” that modern culture’s discomfort with the Carroll/Liddell relationship have impacted upon the nature of subsequent Alice adaptations by highly sexualizing them, from Alan Moore’s graphic novel *Lost Girls* to adult movies. Alice’s subsequent construction as an adult to ensure the acceptability of these depictions renders any return to childhood culturally impossible.

Interested in questions of gendered identity and alternative representational practices with a focus on female imagination and feminist writing practices, in “Beyond the Metaphors of Death and Despair: Susan Sontag’s Play *Alice in Bed* (1993) as a Portrait of Gender”, Nadia Butt discusses Sontag’s dramatic fantasy and its contemplation of death and despair as protest against gender hierarchies. The author employs Freud’s theory of the death drive to examine “how motifs of grief in connection to illness, anguish, death and despair in Sontag’s play shed light on gender discrimination, ‘the angry young woman,’ and the triumphs and limits of female imagination.” Sontag’s Alice offers a figure of stoic resignation whose stance, the author argues, “is no mere surrender to social and domestic injustices, but rather a courageous call for change – for freedom.”

The call for freedom is also taken up in Nicole Richter’s essay albeit from a different perspective. In “Early American Alice Cartoons” the author takes up the interconnection with Disney analyzing the modes of production which chiefly characterized Disney’s work. Disney’s Alice cartoons, Richter argues, represent the projection of fantasies that mystified the reality of labor relations alongside the context of the world of work against which audiences consumed the animated creations. Framed as a form of Wonderland, Disney’s productions are hence contrasted with the vision of the makers of Betty Boop and highlight the inherent conflict between imagination in animation and realism which Disney strived for. Burton’s much later three dimensional Hollywood production offered the film director new technological possibilities which elegantly reformulate the connection between the earlier Alice versions and Burton’s imagination and understanding of animation.

“‘The Real Alice?’: Memory and Adaptation in Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland*” sees Hugh H. Davis stress the film’s reliance on audience associations, expectations and memory which are preformed and brought with them into the cinema, but by offering a sequel to Carroll’s works Burton also builds on the tradition of confusion that Alice films are seen to be marked by. The film also highlights Carroll’s struggle to reconcile his own memories of the seven-year-old Alice and the older version he has a reunion with, thus mirroring the audience who must “link the new face of this more mature Alice with their combined memories of readings and viewings of the younger character.” The question of where the reality of Alice lies is thus situated in this shared yet diverse and very personal range of re-visitations.

The play with a global Alice iconography is also addressed by Eva Jungbluth in “After Alice: *Wonderland*’s Autonomy in Tommy Kovac’s and Sonny Liew’s Comic.” Interestingly enough, in the case of Tommy Kovac and Sonny Liew’s 2008 graphic-adaptation our ‘beloved’ little Alice appears absent. Jungbluth uses the characters absenteeism in order to draw the reader’s attention to medium specific interpretative visualisations of Alice which both build on and deviate from the store of collective representations. It is the play on Alice’s iconographic history that allows author and illustrator to offer “a contemporary interpretive reading, which does not abandon Alice, but confirms her place in our cultural consciousness.”

This assumption is somewhat confirmed by Doyle Ott's examination of Alice performances. In "Believing Impossible Things: Alice in the Circus Ring" Doyle Ott provides several examples of circus adaptations before he attempts analyzing the specifics of what has appealed to this form of adaptation. Thus he stresses for instance how "Alice in Wonderland's episodic narrative structure works well for circus adaptation as the traditional circus format takes the form of a series of acts sequenced to heighten the skill and novelty of each." In his article, the author traces three distinct historical periods in which developments in circus performance have overlapped with revivals of interest in the Alice works for adaptation by new waves of performers, including the author's own involvement in adapting contemporary versions.

Finally, in "'Let the New Wonderland Emerge!': Alice Computer Games as Themed Virtual" Katharina E. Kinder-Kurlanda looks at the journey taken by the Alice character through its emergence as a computer game character. For the author "the Alice that emerges is individual, but it is also part of cultural sharing, or a repertoire of images, icons and story fragments that may be alluded to, played with or transformed in future computer games." The digital Alice hence has become a 'new' icon in a global fantasy market. By bringing together an international group of adaptation scholars this collection seeks to assess a wide spectrum of Alice adaptations through which the collection actively aims to contribute to Alice in Wonderland scholarship on the one hand and on the other hopes to participate in the formation of a discipline in the making.

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