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American Association for Chinese Studies Conference

Translating Text into Film: Redefining the Adaptation and Translation
Divide through Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*

Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012) is not the director's first endeavor in adapting a literary work for the big screen. Prior to *Life of Pi*, he adapted, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), and *Lust, Caution* (2007). In fact, many of his most successful films have been his adaptations. *Life of Pi* is no different as it has also done commercially well both in Hollywood and on the international circuit raking in a box office total of over \$600,000,000,¹ critical praise, as well as prestigious awards, such as the coveted Academy Award for best director. *Life of Pi* was originally a best-selling novel of the same name by Yann Martel. Both focus on the life and adventures of Piscine Molitor Patel, played mainly by Suraj Sharma in the film, a young boy from Pondicherry, who shows an interest in spirituality that has carried into his adulthood, that gets stranded on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, who was part of his father's zoo. It's film counterpart of the same name was adapted from a screenplay by David Magee generally follows the same storyline of the book but not without significant divergences from the source text.

I suggest that Lee's most recent book to film adaptation, *Life of Pi*, provides a site where issues of translation and adaptation are negotiated. To call a film an adaptation simply because it has changed mediums does not take into considerations the complex issues of translation, adaptation, interpretation, and medium. Despite some obvious differences between Martel's *Life of Pi* and Lee's *Life of Pi*, I propose this movement of text to film cannot be simply called an adaptation, but rather the issue at stake in this movement is interpretation and translation.

¹ "Life of Pi (2012)." BoxOfficeMojo.com. Box Office Mojo, 2012. Web. 19 Aug. 2013.

Furthermore, interpretation is dependent on the sensibilities of the interpreter, and with Lee's claims of an ambivalence towards his own background² the issue of translocality become imbedded in the issue of adaptation, translation, and interpretation. In other words, the film, *Life of Pi*, serves as a site where not only translation versus adaptation come face to face but also the issue of translocality comes into play to make us rethink how we draw the lines between these issues. In the first portion of this paper, I address, first, the issue of medium, fidelity, and interpretation and rethink its relationship to translation and adaptation. I, then, contend that translation and adaptation breakdown towards localized interpretation basing my work on George Steiner's seminal text, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* and Hsiu-Chuang Deppman's book, *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction and Film*. In the second portion of this paper, I will look directly at the differences between the two versions of *Life of Pi*, and from this analysis suggest that an interpretation and adaptation is more concerned with translocal sensibilities rather than with medium in order to determine how to see the differences and similarities between translation, adaptation, and interpretation.

Between Literature and Film: The Problems of Medium, Fidelity, and Interpretation in Adaptation and Translation

The issue of what to call a work that has been reinterpreted across mediums still remains. The immediate reaction is to call any work that has been changed from written word to moving image an adaptation whereas, in many cases, works that go from written word to written word in a different language with a certain amount of fidelity are called translations. This reaction is

² Ebert, Roger. "Lonesome Love." *All Content*. Chicago Sun-Times, 11 Dec. 2005. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

problematic in that the issue of what determines the similarity between written words is simply that they are both written down and appear as text on the page. I look at the terms translation and adaptation to deconstruct their relationship with medium in order to discard the issue of medium as a fundamental difference between these two terms, which will thereby dismantle the structure of labeling a work a translation or adaptation according to its medium.

Defining translation has been a difficult task for scholars, and multiple volumes have been printed on this subject attempting to address the elusive question of what is translation?³ A consensus on what translation is has yet to be reached. Looking at even the most basic definition of translation in the Oxford English Dictionary yields multiple results through time. Coming from old French or Latin, translation is "a transporting, translation, noun of action...to transfer v. The action of translating (or its result)."⁴ In this definition, translation seems to be an extremely broad category in that it can range from actual works of translation to the notion of transference. Translation is further broken down into other definitions. It states translation is the "action or process of turning from one language into another... a version in a different language." This is, perhaps, the most recognized and widely known definition of translation because of the role languages and the changing of a text from one language into another that is highlighted. This definition, however, does not mention any other problems when it comes to this type of translation, such as fidelity. Rather, it can be described as a word for word translation. The most interesting definitions of translation follows, "the expression or rendering of something into another medium or form" followed by "Transformation, alternation, change; changing or adapting to another use; renovation." In these simplistic definitions of translation, the notion that medium as a form of difference between translation and adaptation is completely taken down.

³ See Schulte, Rainer, and John Biguenet, eds. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1992.

⁴ "translation, n.". OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. 20 September 2013

Furthermore, it seems as though translation and adaptation can be seen as one in the same when concerning the issue of medium.

Adaptation, according to the OED, has an emphasis on the "action of adjusting,"⁵ which highlights the notion of change, but this does not differ all that much from the definition of translation where change is also a key factor. The OED further points out that adaptation is "the application of something to a particular end or purpose; the action of applying on thing to another or of bringing two things together so as to effect a change in the nature of the objects." In this definition, it can be said that the two things that are being brought together in *Life of Pi* are the narrative within the novel and the medium of film, which synthesize to form the change in the nature of the narrative in that the narrative goes from one of written word to movement image. This, however, ignores the fact that this synthesis that is adaptation does not require that one of the elements brought together is of a different medium.

In fact, adaptation does not necessitate a difference in medium at all. Adaptation can also mean going from a written text to another written text with a certain degree of changes being made. In "Translation and Adaptation: Differences, Intercrossings and Conflict in Ana Maria Machado's Translation of Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll,"⁶ Lauro Maia Amorim explores the issue of translation and adaptation in terms of how written words can not only be translated into a different language via the written word, but it can also be adapted into a different form of the written word. Thus, in terms of its most fundamental definition, there is no ground to which there is a divide between adaptation and translation according to medium. Furthermore, the divide between adaptation and translation does not seem to be a divide at all. In their most basic

⁵ "adaptation, n.". OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. 20 September 2013.

⁶ Amorim, Lauro. "Translation and Adaptation: Differences, Intercrossings and Conflicts in Ana Maria Machado's Translation of Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll." *Cadernos De Tradução* 1.11 (2008): 193-209. Print.

meanings, these two terms are almost the same because they are based on the notion of some sort of change to the source text.

This then leads to the question of whether there is a difference between adaptation and translation and why scholars continue to use these terms at all if they mean the same thing. Aside from these very superficial but fundamental analyses of the definitions of translation and adaptation, this issue has been taken up by multiple scholars from various disciplines in *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. This collection attempts to look at the different ways in which translation is defined from the translated text as in contest with the original text in Hugo Friedrich's essay "On the Art of Translation" to the translation as extending the afterlife of a text in Walter Benjamin's widely read essay "The Task of the Translator."⁷ All of these essays, however, mainly focus on the definition of literary translation and largely ignore adaptation as a possible outlet.

When looking at translation, adaptation, and their relationship to each other, Steiner's claim of the importance of the role interpretation in translation is essential to further breakdown the hierarchy of fidelity that exists between translation and adaptation. He explains, "When we read or hear any language-statement from the past, be it Leviticus or last year's best-seller, we translate. Reader, actor, editor are translators of language out of time."⁸ In other words, translation is an act of interpretation of the source text. Counter to this is Friedrich Schleiermacher's claim that "the activity of translating is radically different from mere interpreting...In this sense, therefore, it is the living power of the individual that produces new forms in the malleable material of the language, originally only for the momentary purpose of

⁷ Schulte, Rainer, and John Biguenet, eds. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1992.

⁸ Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, p.28. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.

communicating transitory awareness."⁹ Schleiermacher explains that the act of utterance is momentary in that it is fixed within certain constraints of its moment. In this way, the language that is used at this moment has one meaning because of its fixed nature. Steiner, however, further points out that language itself is historically contingent and not a free floating signifier in that a specific word is rooted in its specific time of usage and subject to the interpretation of the reader, who also introduces another layer of time in the act of translation. The issue of translation then is one of understanding and of interpreting rather than one of finding the exact equal of a fixed expression. This also implies that, translation does not necessitate the interpretation into another written form, but, rather, translation only posits that it is the expression of that interpreters understanding of the source text.

In *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction and Film*, Hsiu-Chuang Deppman astutely points out that the line between fiction and film is not simply about medium in calling a work an adaptation, although that may be the first reaction of popular critics¹⁰ in an attempt to tersely define a film's genre or inspirations, but considering a film as an adaptation must consider "distinct methods of production (usually an individual writer vs. a collective filming crew), modes of distribution (usually a bookseller vs. a theater), and circumstances of reception...[adaptation theorists] drew so heavily on theoretical resources of hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism, translation, and narratology."¹¹ Here, the terms, translation and adaptation, are not mutually exclusive nor can they be conflated to express the same thing. Moreover, there is no distinct hierarchy of fidelity. Adaptation, rather, is the site

⁹ Schulte, Rainer, and John Biguenet, eds. *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida*, p.38. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1992

¹⁰ Rosen, Christopher. "Life Of Pi' Reviews: Ang Lee's Adaptation Wows At New York Film Festival." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 28 Sept. 2012. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

¹¹ Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang. *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction & Film*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2010.

where complex intersections of different theoretical frameworks come into contact with each other to form the basis of the theory of adaptation. Medium, therefore, is not the fundamental problem that the terms translation and adaptation must overcome, but rather calling a work an adaptation must consider the source text in relation to the new text in a framework that looks at not only issues of translation but of also other relative theoretical frameworks. For Deppman's study of Chinese adaptation, these other frameworks include the already rich tradition of works being embedded in their own historical contexts ranging from political to personal but also of the "*transtextual*"¹² nature of the texts."¹³ Lee's film's position as part of the Chinese adaptation Deppman carves out, however, is problematic in that this text is not based on a Chinese story, like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Thus, in terms of *Life of Pi* a different set of theoretical frameworks must be considered before it can be called an adaptation.

Through Deppman and Steiner's analyses, translation and adaptation are not issues that are related by medium nor fidelity. They cannot be considered mutually exclusive nor can they be conflated to mean the same thing. It is rather, that the theoretical frameworks provided by translation studies can be useful when looking at whether a text can be considered an adaptation of its source text. Translation provides the essential understanding of the role that interpretation plays in producing a new text in that it provides an understanding of historical contingency and of the local nature of translation that can be found in adaptation. Translation is the expression of an interpretation of a source text. This interpretation is rooted in a specific language, not limited to the written word, that is tied to its own historical moment, but it is then taken out of this moment and interpreted across time by readers, actors, and editors who also have their own

¹² Italics in the original.

¹³ Deppman, Hsiu-Chuang. *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction & Film*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2010.

historical contexts. This theoretical framework provided by the discussion of translation emphasizes the local nature of translation, and this can be found in adaptation as well.

Life of Pi(s): Confronting Translocal Sensibilities

Already, the notion of adaptation is a complicated process, and to call Lee's film an adaptation simply because it is a reworking of a specific narrative into a different medium cannot substantiate itself as adaptation, and one must consider other workings that take part in the reimagining process. I propose that to fully understand what adaptation entails in terms of *Life of Pi* the critic or scholar must look at issues of translocal practice along side issues of translation because the remaking of the Martel's story is not simply the taking of a non-historically contingent narrative and turning it into a different form of media. Lee and his team are taking Martel's already time contingent narrative and reinterpreting it in terms of specific localities. Moreover, these localities of Canada and Hollywood among others do not simply exist outside of each other, but they are rearticulated in terms of each other. This process of reinterpretation can be seen through the various differences that present themselves between the book and the film. In particular, I focus on the change in the narrative concerning Pi's love interest, the depiction of nature and beauty, and lack of violence in the film.

Translocality has been a term that has been in vogue with growing studies on transnationalism and globalization, and the term itself continues to be under negotiation. While some studies use it to refer to mobility and spatial connectedness,¹⁴ a more useful definition for this study comes out of translocality as forming an identity or sensibility that does not come from

¹⁴ Greiner, Clemens, and Patrick Sakdapolrak. "Translocality: concepts, applications and emerging research perspectives." *Geography Compass* 7.5 (2013): 373-384.

a single location, such as a nation state, but comes from multiple places. In terms of hierarchy of which place's sensibility has priority, the translocal is not so concerned with how the hierarchy is, but, instead, is interested in how this hierarchy is socially produced, both fixed and changing, and how these sensibilities are relational.¹⁵ Thus, translocality is not a matter of solid facets of sensibility or identity that have converged in one place, but rather it seeks to look at the interaction between certain sensibilities.

In Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*, a matter of translocality and translation appear in the issue of adaptation in relation to the change in the narrative where a love interest for Pi is introduced in the film. In Martel's novel, there is the conspicuous lack of female figures, except for his mother, let alone a love interest for Pi. In Lee's rendition, however, Pi's love interest, plays a large role in the beginning of the film. In many ways, this introduction of the love interest can be seen as an interpretation of Martel's story despite the overt lack of the presence of Pi's lover in the film. First, this silence on a love interest is precisely where one can appear. The book does not deny love or sexuality, but it, instead, does not say anything of it at all. This gap in explanations of love creates a space where Lee's film can reinterpret this silence and show the visual appearance of a lover for the main character, Anandi, played by Shravanthi Sainath. This liberty that the film takes cannot be brushed off as an adaptation privilege because it takes certain liberties in changing the story. This change to the narrative is a practice of translation. Translators, after all, do take certain liberties with the texts they translate, which can be seen from the translations of Ezra Pound and other translators. The film's change, however, is not an issue of fidelity or liberty, but it is an act of interpretation. The silence that the book has on the subject of a love

¹⁵ Greiner, Clemens, and Patrick Sakdapolrak. "Translocality: concepts, applications and emerging research perspectives." *Geography Compass* 7.5 (2013): 373-384.

interest in Pi's adolescence is interpreted by the film as the appearance of Anandi. Thus, here silence is understood as appearance rather than lack.

Anandi's character can also be understood in terms of translocality, especially with Hollywood. This is not to say that all Hollywood films are a certain way or that there is essential about the Hollywood film. It is that Hollywood as an entity and a place plays a role in the making and interpreting of the novel to film. Lee originates from Taiwan, but many of his films are made through the Hollywood system, such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Hulk* (2003). *Life of Pi* is no different in terms of the technical rubric in calling it a Hollywood film with its backing by 20th Century Fox, one of the biggest studios and distributors in America. The film is a reinterpretation of a novel, originally written outside of the Hollywood studio system, within the Hollywood context, and the adding of a love interest for the main character highlights this aspect. The trope of "love" is one of the most common in Hollywood films. The addition of this love interest can be read as a translocal translation. This is due to the process of taking a specific piece of media, the novel, and the insertion of a specific trope to make it more "Hollywood" in an act of interpretation. This interpretation works on two levels. First it is an interpretation of what exactly is a Hollywood sensibility, and the second level of interpretation is onto the storyline itself in order to fit that specific Hollywood sensibility.

It may seem as though there is a hierarchy of sensibility and fidelity being formed because the narrative must undergo a change to fit into the Hollywood system, but the film is actually a site of negotiation for the translocal practice of translation. Although the figure of Anandi is inserted into the film, she is only actually present in the first half of the film. Furthermore, she is relegated to the status of a minor character. It is through her presence and minor character status that the translocal aspect of interpretation is evident. The inclusion of this

character is an interpretation and understanding towards the Hollywood sensibility, but it does not champion Hollywood over the other sensibilities in the film. It further highlights the fact that translocality is a social production in that the making of this character is not to fill up screen time, but to give a nod towards common Hollywood tropes. This shows that the film cannot exist outside of the system, but the film's interpretation of *Life of Pi* is not completely dominated by social workings as well. Thus, Anandi's presence and lack of presence shows that there is an active negotiation with different translocalities to produce the adaptation.

The visual beauty of the film has been hailed by critics,¹⁶ which is seemingly absent in the novel. Another striking difference is the lack of violence in the film compared to Martel's novel. This aesthetic decadence and lack of violence points towards the continuing practice of translocal translation, which does not only consider a set place like Hollywood as a source of sensibility but also the rating system and film market. In its consideration of Hollywood, the lack of violence does not particularly play a role in the interpretation of the film, as many Hollywood films continue to have scenes of extreme violence in films that are commercially successful. The visual beauty of the film compared to the novel, however, is a place where interpretation again comes into contact with Hollywood. Unlike the novel where Pi's encounters with whales appears at multiple places in the book but are kept to brief paragraphs,¹⁷ Pi's encounter with the whale at one point in the night while floating on the life boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, is a scene where the beauty of nature literally takes over the screen. The movie screen is flooded with the image of a star-filled sky as a whale gently glides across. At the same time, Pi's rations are thrown overboard off his raft due to the power of the whale's swimming, but this scene is sandwiched between images of the whale moving fluidly in the shimmering night ocean. These

¹⁶ French, Philip. "Life of Pi- Review." *TheGuardian.com*. The Guardian, 22 Dec. 2012. Web. 18 Aug. 2013.

¹⁷ Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*. Boston: Mariner, 2012.

types of images seem gratuitous to the film because there is no other message other than the beauty of nature and possibly the insignificance of man. On the one hand, they are gratuitous and add to the marketability for the film in its use of images and technology. On the other hand, this message of man versus nature is another common trope within the Hollywood system.¹⁸ The inclusion of these types of scenes, therefore, facilitates the understanding of the film within the popular cinema system.

These scenes of nature's overwhelming beauty contrast starkly with the violence in the book, which lacks a presence in the film. This lack of violence can at once be seen as an issue with fidelity and, more importantly, it is an issue of translocal translation that leads to the adaptation of the novel to film. The scenes of raw physical violence that do occur are relegated to places that are seen but unseen at the same time. Most notably, on the life boat, when the Hyena attacks the other animal passengers, they happen so quickly on the screen that the viewer can hardly see the violence that is being committed. Moreover, the image of Richard Parker attacking the Hyena, are seen in that they happen on screen, but they concealed underneath the small covering in the front of the life boat. This drastically differs from the images of violence that are described in the novel. For example, Orange Juice's, the orangutan, death is described in detail in the novel from her ineffectual thumps and pulling on the hyena's hair as "her throat was being squeezed by its jaws."¹⁹ These scenes of violence and the lack of violence in the film are reinterpretations of Martel's narrative that must also consider the rating system that is put into place, which would affect the film's marketability. The lack of violence or images of softened violence allow the film to be rated as PG on the rating system set up by the Motion Picture

¹⁸ "Top 10 Central Themes in Film." *TheScriptLab.Com*. The Script Lab, n.d. Web. 18 Aug. 2013.

¹⁹ Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*, p.171. Boston: Mariner, 2012.

Association of America (MPAA).²⁰ If more violence was included in order to be more faithful to the novel's depiction, such as Orange Juice's death, the rating of the film would become more strict due to the depiction of violence, thus limiting the audience as the rating determines who can watch the film in its exhibition. This reinterpretation of violence as not as overtly present on the screen shows that the process of adaptation is not limited to aesthetic choice, but the issue of visual interpretation cannot be considered independently from official institutions, such as the MPAA, and marketability because the purpose of the film is not to simply retell the story in a different light but to also be a commercially viable and profitable project.

Through these various considerations, different types of sensibilities also emerge that act on the source text to create the adaptation. The choice by the film to include certain visual aesthetics and leave out depictions of violence shows that interpretation is contingent on the time and regulations that are in place at the particular moment. Whether it is the Hollywood film with its emphasis on love as a main trope or the MPAA with its specific rules for the rating of a film, specific sensibilities are considered when interpreting a film. *Life of Pi* serves as a place of convergence for all of these notions. The novel is taken into the local context, which implies a moment of the narrative into the local as well. From this movement and the narrative's association with multiple places as both novel and film, the translocal is always already present. The importance of the translocal is especially highlighted when looking at the process of translation of the film. In this sense, the local is not a geographically bound space; it is the different places, such as the Hollywood sensibility, that are taken into account when the novel is being translated into film.

Conclusion

²⁰ MPAA.ORG. Motion Picture Association of America, n.d. Web. 8 Sept. 2013.

In reviews of films, the automatic assumption for many critics is to call a film that is based on a novel an adaptation. In fact, adaptation, according to Dudley Andrew in *Concepts of Film Theory*, is not a simple matter. For convenience, he reduces it to three main concepts: borrowing, intersecting, and the fidelity of transformation, and in terms of literary works being transformed into celluloid, he highlights the notion of the fidelity of transformation. He astutely says, "Here we have a clear-cut case of the film trying to measure up to a literary work, or of an audience expecting to make such a comparison."²¹ There is, indeed, the problem of fidelity, but this is not the only issue when calling a work an adaptation. Andrew further notes, "We have come round to the other side of the argument to find once more that the study of adaptation is logically tantamount the study of cinema as a whole. The system by which film involves us in fictions and the history of that system are ultimately the questions we face even when starting with the simple observation of an equivalent tale told by a novel and a film."²² Dudley points to the fact that when discussing adaptation, the simple recognition of the equivalent narrative in two different types of texts is not enough to substantiate adaptation.

In order to study adaptation, there must be a consideration of the system of cinema as a whole, and the translocal comes out of this examination. The question of what constitutes a system of cinema emerges as well. Cinema is a complex machine with different moving parts, but Lee's film, *Life of Pi*, proved to be a fruitful place to look at the moment adaptation appears. The film can be considered a translocal translation resulting in the emergence of the adaptation of Martel's novel. The translocal in relation to cinema, and in particular to *Life of Pi*, is a process that has multiple issues with which it must wrestle. The identity of the director is one that stands

²¹ Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984.

²² Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984.

out, especially in a Hollywood dominated film industry on global exhibition. Ang Lee can be considered, himself, already a translocal figure in his identification with Taiwan and America. It is not that he has a specific, solid Taiwanese and American identity, which exist on his person; it is, instead, that these two are socially produced in that they are labels that he himself and others use to identify the director as well as the films he makes.

Apart from this first translocality, the film is also considered an international endeavor with backers from Ingenious Media in the United Kingdom and Haishang Films in Taiwan making it a point of intersection for these companies and places. The, perhaps, most evident player in the film's translocality is America and Hollywood. Shown by the choice to include common tropes, such as love, and visual beauty through nature, the inclusion of these are interpretations of the novel that are put into the visual medium. Another issue where the social product of translocal film is seen is the exclusion of overt violence. There is a mingling of the novel, interpretation, and the issues of rating and marketability that converge on the film.

This consideration of film ratings, marketability, audience, production are only a few things that are part of the system of cinema. It is through the study of these things, however, that the theoretical notion of adaptation can appear. Adaptation, as Andrew begins to explain, must be the study of not only novel, film, and narrative, but must include the whole cinematic system, which cannot ignore translocal practice and translation. Furthermore, adaptation cannot be seen as a solid determined genre or label, but rather is a process of translation and negotiation among various facets of a system of cinema.