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## Exploring Cultural Translation and Audience Reception in Global Film Adaptations with Reference to Select Novels

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**Abstract:** The concept of adaptation in films goes beyond the on-screen transformation that once defined cinema. It now involves a sophisticated process of cross-cultural translation, where the story is decontextualised to suit foreign markets without changing its core meaning. This research explores global film adaptation, cultural reinterpretation, and reception, discussing the role of adaptation in globalisation at the intersection of cultural specificity and universality. Case studies include *The Departed* (2006), a Hollywood remake of the Hong Kong film *Infernal Affairs*; *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), a British adaptation of Indian urban poverty; and *Let Me In* (2010), the American remake of the Swedish horror *Let the Right One In*, examining decisions made during adaptation- such as variations in narrative, visual and tonal changes- and how these variations influence acceptance across different cultures. The study references adaptation theory by Linda Hutcheon, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. It concludes that successful adaptations typically balance localisation with maintaining cultural essence, whereas poorly executed ones tend to rely on stereotyping or oversimplification of cultural interactions.

**Keywords:** intercultural cinema; narrative localization; hybridity; transnational media; adaptation theory

## Introduction

In a world that is rapidly becoming globalised, cinema, beyond its role as entertainment, can be viewed as an essential medium of cultural translation. The practice of adapting or reinterpreting existing narratives through other media and in new contexts has gained significant importance in the contemporary era. Adaptation, traditionally understood as the transposition of literary texts onto the film screen, now often involves cross-cultural reinterpretation, where stories are reshaped according to the cultural expectations, norms, and sensitivities of the new audience. Such conversion from local to global or vice versa is crucial to issues of cultural translation and audience reception. As films travel across nations, they encounter viewers with diverse cultural, linguistic, and emotional backgrounds. A story that appeals to one audience may require little or extensive modification to resonate in another. This reworking is not only vocal or visual but also cultural, involving changes in values, character portrayal, and focus on subject matter. These cultural negotiations define modern global film adaptation. However, these changes are not always neutral; they can reinforce stereotypes, diminish original themes, or even misrepresent a culture, thus influencing how viewers perceive the film and its originating culture.

This paper aims: (a) to discuss the role of cultural translation in global film adaptations, and (b) to examine how various audiences accept these adaptations according to their cultural backgrounds. This study examines adaptation strategies, narrative and aesthetic changes, and their overall effects on cross-cultural audience reception through the use of qualitative case studies of selected film adaptations, including *The Departed*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Let the Right One In*. The theory that forms the basis of this analysis is adaptation theory, as developed by Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam, as well as the theories of cultural studies by Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, and the theory of reception. The global adaptations of films can only be successful when there is a subtle compromise between respecting the original story and moulding it into something new that will seem fresh and authentic to audiences in different countries. The work, by revealing the dynamics of such cultural translation and reception processes, can help to better understand the difficulties of transnational storytelling in cinema.

## Conceptual Framework

This part summarises the theoretical basis of the study, focusing on three key dimensions: theories of adaptation, cultural translation, and audience reception. Collectively, these models render it possible to place stories in context, as they vary in the process of global film adaptation and how culturally diverse audiences interpret them.

### *Adaptation theories*

Traditionally, the concept of film adaptation has been addressed based on fidelity criticism, which is the degree to which an adaptation is considered faithful to its source text. Modern scholars, however, argue in support of a wider and more adaptable perspective. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), Linda Hutcheon establishes that

adaptation is both an action and a product of action, which can be characterised as a process of reinterpretation and creation, rather than mere duplication. More importantly, she emphasises the intertextuality and participatory nature of adaptations, as they create new perspectives on already familiar stories, regardless of the medium or culture. Robert Stam (2000) blames the fidelity discourse for its hierarchical classification, where literature is prioritised. According to Stam, a dialogic model of adaptation, based on intertextuality, implies that the adapted film is perceived as a text within a network of texts, rather than as an inferior copy. This leaves it viable to consider adaptation a negotiation between the filmmaker and the source material, as well as the target audience. An important argument in the field of adaptation is the one between fidelity and creativity: whether a good adaptation follows its original, or is allowed to creatively depart. The tension is even more acute in international adaptation situations, considering that a writer must make a trade-off between cultural authenticity and narrative accessibility (Desmond & Hawkes, 2006).

### ***Media Cultural Translation***

With the cross-cultural adaptation of films, the process of cultural translation is as important as narrative adaptation. The concept of hybridity, developed by Homi Bhabha (1994), provides a perspective that views identity as a dynamic, negotiated entity in the third space where cultures intersect. Adaptations, therefore, are a hybrid text which are a mixture of the original and target culture.

In her critique of cultural translation, Gayatri Spivak (1992) adopted a post-colonial perspective, advising against the erasure or simplification of the peripheral voice when relaying its story to audiences in the dominant rest of the world. Her work and both Arts raise awareness of the politics of representation, which also feature in the numerous adaptations, such as *Slumdog Millionaire*, which was simultaneously publicised and condemned as representing Indian poverty.

The concept of localisation and globalisation turns out to be the most important ones in the context of film production on the global level. Globalisation is a term defined by Iwabuchi (2002) and denotes the simultaneous global circulation of media that is customised locally. This dynamic is a common feature of adaptations, which may alter the behaviour of characters, setting, or even ideologies to give the content local appeal to residents, while preserving globally relevant themes.

### ***Theory of Audience Reception***

When examining how audiences receive adaptations, it is necessary to work with reception theory. The Encoding/Decoding model proposed by Stuart Hall (1980) suggests that producers supply texts with meaning, which are interpreted differently by media consumers depending on their cultural and social contexts. The model goes a long way in investigating how various international audiences might interpret the same adaptation in different ways, negotiating, or fighting against the meanings inherent therein.

Scholars such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, as well as the reader-response tradition, have moved the attention to the reader rather than the text (Iser,

1978). As readers do, viewers interpret the narrative through personal and cultural experiences, particularly when it is an adaptation of settings or values with which they are unfamiliar. The exploration of transcultural reception, as conducted by Higson (2010), actively focuses on the contribution of global audiences to the meaning-making process. As more people gain access to international content through streaming platforms, contemporary audiences are becoming more diverse and critically focused, and they tend to approach adaptations both aesthetically and culturally.

This study aims to assess not only the meaning of adaptation (in terms of story clarity) across cultures, but also how changes are perceived or not across cultures about the way stories are adapted to resonate with viewers in different parts of the world.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach to a case study that examines the prospects of global film adaptations in translating cultural issues and how they are received by different audience groups. The methodological framework emphasises interpretive methods rooted in research from film studies, cultural theory, and reception studies, allowing for detailed analysis of texts and their social meanings. The study is organised around three case studies that serve as examples of significant instances of cross-cultural adaptation in modern cinema. The first includes the original Hollywood version of the Hong Kong classic *The Departed* (2006), a heavily altered remake of the Hong Kong crime thriller *Infernal Affairs* (2002). The second case is *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), an adaptation of the novel *Q&A* by Vikas Swarup, a British production set in India but viewed through a Western directing perspective. The third example is *Let Me In* (2010), based on the Swedish horror film *Let the Right One In* (2008). These films were selected based on their notable adaptation features, including transculturalism, universal themes, and available data on criticism and audience responses. In both instances, applying a source narrative to a particular cultural setting and then adapting it for another audience allows for a comparative analysis of the decisions made in using the narration and the issues related to cultural negotiation.

This study utilises a combined source of information, integrating both primary and secondary data to provide evidence. The source and adapted films are discussed in terms of modifications to visual language, narrative development, character depiction, and the topic under investigation. Audience reception is also evaluated using user-generated content on sites such as Letterboxd, Reddit, and YouTube, which offer data on viewers' immediate interpretations and emotional responses. The theoretical aspect of contextual analysis is supported by academic sources focused on adaptation theory and audience reception (Hutcheon, 2013). Textual analysis and reception analysis are incorporated into the overall framework. The elements subject to textual analysis include setting, aesthetics, pacing, and symbolism, aiming to understand how cultural transformation is reflected in cinematic language. Since reception analysis considers how audiences from different cultures may respond to media texts, the model of the encoding/decoding system developed by Stuart Hall (1980), alongside Higson's (2010) theories of transcultural audience reception, are invaluable to this research.

This research has certain limitations. The validity of the reception analysis is largely subjective, given the significant fluctuations in cultural valuation and personal bias. Furthermore, a considerable portion of the audience data relies on either unverified or anonymous internet users, leading to less accurate demographic targeting. Nonetheless, by triangulating user criticism, critical commentary, and academic insights, this study maintains analytical depth and cross-perspective reliability.

### Case Studies

The following section presents three case studies that examine how global film adaptations employ cultural translation and how audiences in different regions perceive such adaptations. They are chosen based on a unique cultural origin and the extent of their reinterpretation abroad.

#### Case Study 1:

##### The Departed (2006) adaptation of the Hong Kong Infernal Affairs (2002)

The Departed, directed by Martin Scorsese, is a typical movie that showcases how a localised crime movie, such as Infernal Affairs, based in Hong Kong, can be adapted for Western audiences. Although the basic premise of the two films is the presence of moles within the police and the mafia, there is also an immense cultural transformation.

##### *Symbolism and City Local: Character and City:*

The original movie relies on low-key acting and low-key tension in an intensely stylish Hong Kong cops-and-mafia setting. The characters embody Confucian notions of duty, shame, and fate. On the contrary, The Departed shifts this tension into the grimy Boston streets, where it is mixed with the politics of Irish-American identity, guilt, Catholicism, and American manliness (Tang, 2009).

##### *Americanization types of themes:*

Although both movies explore moral ambiguity intertwined with optional spiritual overtones and the concept of karma, The Departed strikes a note of loudness and cynicism about society. Scorsese explores the themes of individuality, justice through violence, and emotional instability, which are typical of the Hollywood tradition of neo-noir (Stam, 2000). The conclusion in which justice is rendered through vigilantism is opposed to the ambiguous end of the original since it symbolises two contrasting moral perceptions.

##### *Reception Dynamics:*

The Departed earned four Academy Awards, including the best director and best picture awards, and was universally acclaimed in the U.S. for its tight plot, good performance, and cultural specificity. The film, however, was received much more critically in Asia, which saw it as a watered-down version of the original. Some welcomed comments were made on the camerawork, but the rampant violence used and the loss of philosophical implications were noted (Chan, 2007). This opposition is a variation of the model proposed by Hall (1980), in which the encoded meaning is interpreted variably based on the viewer's cultural background.

*Audience Expectations:*

American audiences appreciated the thrilling, emotional drama and catharsis of justice, while Hong Kong viewers viewed the adaptation as a commercial remake lacking nuance. It is this deviation that highlights how international modifications can be effective when adapted to domestic aesthetics at the expense of cultural subtext.

**Case Study 2:****Slumdog Millionaire (2008) - British version of an Indian Story**

Slumdog Millionaire is a film directed by Danny Boyle, adapted from the 2005 novel by Indian writer Vikas Swarup, titled Q&A; however, the film sets the story in a Western setting. The worldwide reception, popularity, and controversy surrounding the film are a typical demonstration of the strained tension over cultural representation in international cinema.

*Orientalism and Western Gaze:*

There is a rags-to-riches story construction in which the film already has a style that foreign viewers can consume, the Western audience. Even its critics say that it represents orientalism that sensationalises India as an exotic, violent, at the same time, spiritually redeeming landscape, which appeals to the global market but derails the local realities (Spivak, 1992). The stylised camera work and images have a disordered look, and the language used (English more than Hindi) suggests that the film is both cross-cultural and cross-eyed.

*Cultural Stereotyping vs International Emotional Plea:*

Boyle reduces difficult Indian social tensions to a manageable level: poverty, crime, destiny and love. Although such a simplification contributed to accusations of cultural stereotyping, there was no language or cultural barrier that could enhance the interests and emotional appeal that the movie raised. The nonlinear storytelling, universal themes of hope and resilience, and usage of music made it appeal to all cultures.

*India vs West Reception:*

Slumdog Millionaire was eulogised in the West as a feel-good movie, garnering eight Oscars and racking up the festival circuits. Western critics were fond of its so-called Reality of Indian suffering (Scott, 2009). In India, it was received mixedly, however. Although urban elites considered this success on the international scene, critics and masses living in slums claimed the representation was exploitative (Mehta, 2009). Such a difference signifies the decoding theory written by Hall (1980): Indian audiences “negotiated or resisted” (Opposed) the perceived dominant reading in the West.

*Festivals Circuit and International Achievement:*

The ascendancy of the movie through events such as Toronto and Telluride underlines the importance of universal outlets in generating perception. Its success was not only narrative-determined but also defined by the international media context,



marketing, and positive comments from Western critics, which illustrates how gatekeeping and power influence reception.

### Case Study 3:

#### Let the Right One In (Sweden 2008) vs. Let Me In (USA 2010)

Another detail highlighted by this case is the cultural peculiarities in the horror genre, as the mood, silence, and general emotional tone differ radically by region. The remake version of Let The Right One In (directed by Tomas Alfredson), a coming-of-age vampire film produced in Sweden, was Americanized under the name Let Me In, directed by Matt Reeves.

#### *Story Time Frame, Aesthetics and Feeling:*

The Swedish version is intentionally slow, featuring lengthy pauses, minimalist and subdued emotion, and straightforward cinematography, evoking a Nordic melancholy. However, Let Me In accelerates the tempo, escalates violence, and employs dark colour grading to conform to the Hollywood film language of horror (Higson, 2010). These style decisions are cultural: Delicacy in Scandinavian horror as opposed to Americans being explicit in their films.

#### *Cultural tipoffs and Dramatization:*

Where Let the Right One In seems to investigate the same elements of loneliness and childhood trauma in a quiet, personal way, Let Me In introduces elements of suspense, music, and visual metaphors that explore similar aspects. The original American version places more emphasis on bullying, vengeance, and emotional release, aligning more closely with the conventions of the U.S. genre.

#### *The Nordic Alternative to American Horror:*

The original refers to vampirism as a metaphor of social alienation with the use of confusion and uneasiness. Conversely, the remake has clear backstories and emotional release. Such modifications demonstrate that, despite the globalisation of horror, this genre remains deeply rooted in cultural psychology and storytelling traditions (Hutcheon, 2013).

#### *Response of the Audiences in the Two Regions:*

Let the Right One In was reportedly lauded in Sweden and most of Europe as a genre-blurring masterpiece, being praised for its restraint and novelty. In America, Critics applauded Let Me In, and it performed modestly at the box office, indicating that even a culturally sensitive adaptation might fail commercially, lacking a special non-cultural adjunct (e.g., name power or promotion). Both of these movies were frequently compared around the world: the cinephiles preferred the first one due to its nuance, whereas average viewers preferred the remake to be more overt.

### Findings Synthesis between Case Studies

In the three case studies, there are several trends:

1. Adaptation as Cultural Negotiation: It can be crime thrillers, stories about poverty, and horror stories, but the mechanism of global adaptation is always a deliberate choice on what the story can be kept and what is to be changed in order to fit the needs of the new culture.

2. Techniques of Cultural Translations: Adaptations will tend to alter tone, pace, character development or theme emphasis- a change was, in the case of *The Departed*, the added viciousness and finality; in *Slumdog Millionaire* stylization of the Indian way of life to be consumed with an emotional zeal; in *Let Me In*, suspense was heightened.

3. Audience Reception and Cultural Positioning: There will be hardly any uniformity in reception. Depending on their positionality, audiences will give meaning. A movie might be accepted as authentically made or artfully made by Western audiences, but it may also be seen as stereotyping, erasing, or misrepresenting by its home audiences.

4. Agents of Power and Platform: In most cases, global plots are often dominated by Western adaptations due to their possession of awards, platforms, and media that make their adaptations supersede those of other cultures at the receiving end (Iwabuchi, 2002).

These observations highlight the multiplicity of cross-national film adaptations. Instead of being merely artistic variants, they are also cultural discourses caused by the identity, power and participation of the audience.

### **Cross-Case Comparative Analysis**

The studies of three films – *The Departed*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Let Me In* – offer various yet interconnected messages about the mechanisms and issues of film adaptation on a global scale. An examination of their adaptation strategies, cultural translation mechanisms and reception patterns allows us to understand the broader issues of transnational storytelling dynamics.

### **Cultural Translation and Adaptation Strategies**

In all three adaptations, a consistent pattern emerges: the adjustment of tone and pacing in the narration to meet the audience's expectations. Instead of the spiritual indecisiveness of *Infernal Affairs*, *The Departed* replaces it with the American crime drama, characterised by grittier and colder emotional edges. Likewise, *Let Me In* rearranges the ponderous direction of *Let the Right One In* to an emotional suspense thriller. This is characteristic of globalisation adaptation practice that favours highlighting the genre conventions recognisable by the intended audience, but not the subject matter or plot.

The second common tactic is the alteration of cultural signifiers. Indian social realities in *Slumdog Millionaire* are refracted through the prism of a Western narrative, a choice that highlights aspects of hope and destiny rather than critiquing the structure. In a similar regard, the subtle hierarchy in Hong Kong society is substituted by the working-class and Catholic moral in Boston, according to the film *The Departed*. Such



developments are depicted by Iwabuchi (2002) as a cultural odour reducing process by which a possibly unfamiliar or foreign component is adjusted to be more relatable.

### **Reception Patterns**

Reactions to these adaptations among the audience vary, indicating that the cultural context plays an active role in determining meaning (Hall, 1980). Such Western viewers were likely to interpret these films according to the implied tonal purpose – e.g., *The Departed* as a thriller with lives at stake, *Slumdog Millionaire* as a redemptive fable, and *Let Me In* as a coming-of-age horror movie. On the contrary, source-country viewers tended to be ambivalent or critical, pointing at the absence of nuance (*Infernal Affairs*), oversimplification of the other culture (*Slumdog Millionaire*), or flattening of emotions (*Let the Right One In*).

A significant revelation in this regard is the negotiated reading in a transnational context. To illustrate, in the case of *Slumdog Millionaire*, which was worldwide acclaimed, Indian readers presented opposing and negotiated forms of readings. Some viewers received the movie due to its global fame, while others did not accept its portrayal of Indian poverty.

### **Success conditions and Traps**

In many cases, the greater success of world adaptations is associated with their capability to strike a balance between the localisation and preservation of the cultural texture of the original. *The Departed* managed to perform successfully by incorporating local American themes into the borrowed framework. On the other hand, *Let Me In*, though, was a competent film, it lacked the originality of the Swedish film as well. *Slumdog Millionaire* was commercially successful due to its effective marketing and emotional universality; however, it was also criticised for representing problematic politics. Pitfalls include cultural erasure, weakening of complex socio-political realities; over-westernisation, forcing the imposition of preeminent rhetorical forms over the richness of the culture; and tokenism, dressing without the involvement of exotics in backgrounds.

The case studies on film adaptation demonstrate that the reproduction of narrative is not the only issue at hand, but rather cultural interpretation and negotiation. Whether a global adaptation is successful or not requires not only a certain talent for storytelling but also cultural mindfulness, moral representation, and knowledge about the interpretive frameworks in the received culture.

### **Conclusion**

The multilayered complexities of global film adaptations have been explored in this study, which has been achieved by examining how cultural translation operates in transnational film remakes and how audiences interpret them within social and cultural contexts. A comparative study of *The Departed*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Let the Right One In* provides an in-depth analysis. It establishes that adaptation cannot be viewed as a passive process of replication. However, it is rather an active process involving successful cultural negotiation, which is influenced by ideological framing, aesthetic

conventions, audience psychology, as well as global market demands. All of the adaptations reveal how film producers exercise certain creative choices to adapt narratives across boundaries. However, they tend to redefine, simplify, or recontextualise some of the most essential aspects of the original text.

Among the key conclusions of the given research, it is crucial to state that cultural translation is interpretive and value-laden. Adaptations often represent the most favoured norms and tastes of the target audiences, which in most instances result in the simplification of intricate cultural sophistications or the substitution of specific local realities with broad topics that appeal globally. Such modifications can make a film more relatable and engaging on an emotional level, but they also bring about the loss or distortion of the original cultural context. In this sense, one may cite *Slumdog Millionaire* as another example that managed to raise international empathy with its positive storyline, but was criticised in India on the same account as perpetrating stereotypical imagery of poverty. Equally, *The Departed* realigned the structure of *Infernal Affairs* to make it appealing to the American audience, but in the process, lost the mysticism and ethical balance that was so poignant in the original.

In terms of reception to audiences, the study meets its purpose by asserting that audiences are not mere receivers of messages but decoders. In this case, the encoding/decoding model, as suggested by Stuart Hall (1980), proves useful, revealing that various groups of people can interpret the same text in different ways due to uncertainties in their positioning within cultures, emotional history, and awareness of the information source. Reception is never homogeneous, but rather a dynamic, negotiated, and lived experience. This, therefore, means that adaptations should not be seen as purely creative objects, but rather as interpretive sites of culture.

Suggestions for further research include, but are not limited to, production houses and filmmakers ought to engage in ethical adaptation, which implies the presence of cultural consultants who will facilitate the faithful and respectful translation of themes and identities. Second, pre-release screenings of the source region and target region, as well as post-release testing with the audience, can help creators prepare for any differences in meaning and address them accordingly. Third, one should work in the direction of diversifying the narrative pipeline, trying to facilitate more balanced relationships between producers of the source and target cultures, and to decrease interpretive asymmetry and promote narrative realism.

This study proposes several avenues for future research. Researchers could explore how streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, are transforming the world's adaptation equilibrium, shifting the focus to the non-Western world instead. Moreover, it is possible to see the impact of AI-based translation tools on subtitling, dubbing, and narrative localisation. The other key focus of research is the reception of translations in non-Western contexts, such as the adaptation of Korean films in Japan or the transfer of Indian stories to African nations, where the influence of the West may not be as predominant, yet cultural translation remains complicated. In a world where media products are becoming increasingly transnational, adaptations can truly positively connect cultures, provided they are approached with creative integrity,

cultural awareness, and audience diversity in mind. With the boundaries between local and global storytelling becoming increasingly blurred, the necessity to translate cultures responsibly through cinema remains an ethical imperative that is becoming more urgent.

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