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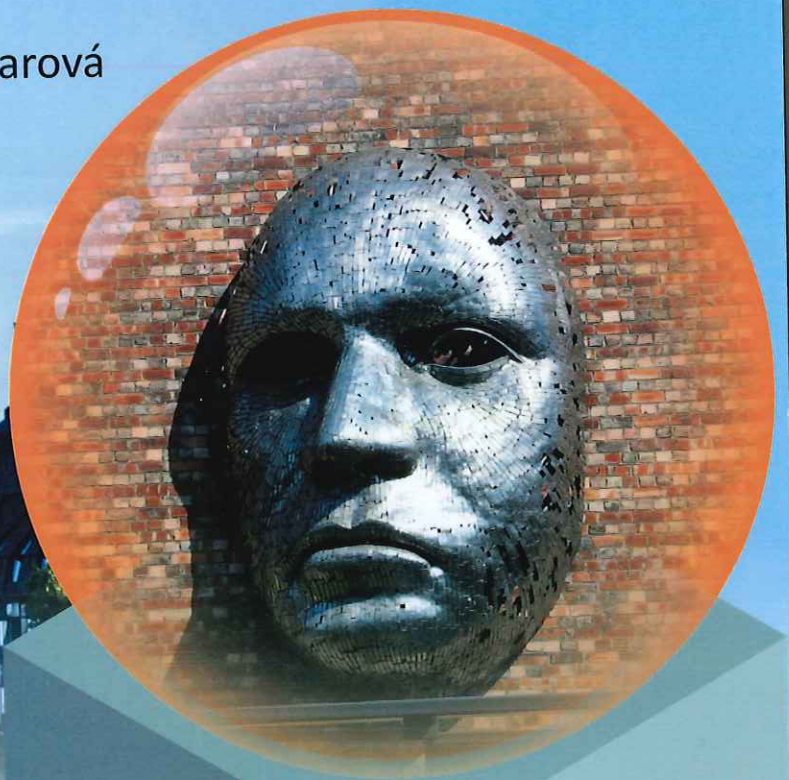
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LIVES OF PI: ON TURNING BOOKER PRIZES INTO ACADEMY AWARDS

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ABSTRACT: Part of a larger, forthcoming project on screen adaptations of novels that have won or been short-listed for the Booker Prize for Fiction, this paper focuses in particular on director Ang Lee's 2012 adaptation of Yann Martel's 2002 Booker-winner *Life of Pi*. With reference to recent developments in Adaptation Studies—and, in particular, to critical movements away from treating "source material" for adaptations as "original" and adaptations themselves as derivative and inferior, and towards understanding the relationship between adapted texts and adaptations as intertextual—it argues that Lee's film playfully subverts notions of "originality" by casting the novel on which it is based as the adaptation rather than as the adapted text. Moreover, it argues that Lee's film is one of a number of recent, prominent screen adaptations of "well-loved novels" to take such an approach, and that such works encourage us to consider the relationship between adapted texts and adaptations as intertextual.

KEYWORDS: Adaptation Studies; Lee, Ang (director), *Life of Pi*; Martel, Yann, *Life of Pi*; the Man Booker Prize for Fiction; Academy Awards

For decades, Adaptation Studies consisted almost exclusively of comparing well-loved books with their big-screen adaptations, and largely involved denouncing the latter as being inherently inferior to, and as failing to be "faithful" enough to, their "source material." More recently, however, Adaptation Studies has—quite rightly—moved away from this rather tired critical model.

Firstly, critics have challenged the assumption that "source material"—particularly when it is literary—is inherently superior to a (supposedly derivative) "adaptation". In the context of screen adaptations of literary novels, Brian McFarlane's 1996 book *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* played an important role in this regard. McFarlane identifies what he terms two "unhelpful attitudes".[1] Firstly, "fidelity critics" who "premiss their reading and evaluation of the film on the implied primacy of

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[1] Robert McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 197.

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the novel"; secondly, the "opposite approach", which "simply insists on the film's autonomy and leaves it at that. Such an approach may well advocate a proper respect for the film's autonomy, but it ignores the continuing interest that exists in the convergence among the arts."[2] In her much broader account of what she calls "the phenomenon of adaptation" — an account which explores a much wider range of media — Linda Hutcheon similarly suggests that "whether it be in the form of a videogame or a musical, an adaptation is likely to be greeted as minor and subsidiary and certainly never as good as the 'original'."[3] For Hutcheon, however, "to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative. Yet … disparaging opinions on adaptation as a secondary mode — belated and therefore derivative — persist."[4] One of the major developments that has occurred in Adaptation Studies, then, is the critical interrogation and refutation of the supposed supremacy of "source material". Hutcheon prefers the term "adapted text" to "source material", and this shift in terminology offers a useful starting point in terms of dismantling the reductive binary ("original/adaptation") which Hutcheon rightly identifies as ubiquitous, unhelpful and misleading.

Another major development in Adaptation Studies has been the shift away from focusing almost exclusively on screen adaptations of well-loved novels. In one of the above quotes from Hutcheon, she mentions musicals and video games; other examples of adaptations to which she draws attention include hypertext fiction, interactive art installations, comic books and theme parks. "Adaptations," Hutcheon asserts, "are everywhere today."[5] That said, Hutcheon is under no illusion that adaptation itself is anything new — indeed, adaptation is just as old as are stories themselves.

As well as challenging the supposed supremacy of "source material", Hutcheon is also keen to disrupt the supposed unidirectionality of the relationship between adapted text and adaptation. She describes the *process* of adaptation as "repetition, but repetition without replication",[6] and describes *an* adaptation as "a derivation that is not derivative."[7] Perhaps most importantly, Hutcheon argues that, "seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as*

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2 Robert McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, 197.
3 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), xiv.
4 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xv.
5 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2.
6 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 7.
7 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9.

adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition and variation."[8]

Given that Adaptation Studies has developed in such interesting and productive ways in recent years, there is perhaps a certain danger in embarking upon the kind of research project of which this paper is just one part; that is, an exploration of high-profile screen adaptations of novels that have experienced Booker Prize success. Indeed, such a project could be seen as rather retrograde. It could be accused of returning to the bad old days of comparing popular films to the well-loved novels on which they are based, and of doing so at the expense of exploring all of the innovative new forms of adaptation which digital technologies are making possible. Moreover, while the Academy Awards and the Booker Prize are, of course, both extraordinarily high-profile, every year—and not, perhaps, without good reason—both are scorned and ridiculed by critics as well as by creative practitioners. However, I would suggest that there are some very interesting aspects to this field of study.

As the title of this collection suggests, all of the papers presented here— in their various disciplines and fields, and employing very different critical approaches and methodologies—are actively engaged in "searching for culture". However, in a rather different context, major film studios are *also* searching for culture; indeed, sometimes "culture" not only sells but actually proves incredibly profitable. The Booker Prize is often seen as the ultimate endorsement from the literary establishment, and all but guarantees immense commercial success for any novel that wins it. Accordingly, novels that have experienced Booker success have often presented golden opportunities to film studios—no more so than in the 1990s, when just two adaptations of Booker Prize-winning novels won no fewer than sixteen Academy Awards between them. Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*—based on Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, which won the Booker Prize in 1983—won seven Academy Awards in 1993, and made around fifteen times its budget at the box office. Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient*—based on Michael Ondaatje's 1992 joint-winner of the Booker Prize—won nine Oscars in 1996, and made around nine times its budget at the box office. Smaller-scale Merchant Ivory film *The Remains of the Day*—based on Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 Booker-winner—was nominated for eight Academy Awards, and perhaps only failed to win any of them because it had the misfortune to come up against *Schindler's List*. Still, box office revenue for *The Remains of the Day* was more than quadruple its budget. The 1990s proved to film studios that

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[8] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8. Italics in the original.

Booker Prize-winning novels could represent major opportunities in term of both commercial and critical success.

There are, however, interesting questions here about what kinds of Booker Prize-winning novels actually get adapted. Firstly, Booker Prize judges have, in general, tended to embrace fiction that is formally experimental, and formally experimental works of fiction can pose serious challenges to the film-makers who seek to adapt them. Secondly, while novels must originally be published in English in order to be considered for the Booker Prize, until 2014 the scope of the Booker Prize excluded the work of writers from the United States, the country that remains by far the single largest market in terms of global box office revenue. In order to invest heavily in an adaptation of a novel that has had Booker Prize success, then, major film studios have often had to be convinced that they can sell a non-American narrative to a mainstream American audience. The question then becomes, what kinds of non-American narratives have been considered marketable to the cinema-going American public? Firstly, it is notable that *The English Patient, Schindler's Ark/Schindler's List* and *The Remains of the Day* are not only all set in the mid-twentieth century, but are all set primarily during the build up to World War II and/or during the War itself. To put it bluntly, World War II is familiar terrain to American audiences, and thus sells (or, at least, has the possibility of selling) cinema tickets. Likewise, the notion of Englishness is familiar (and possibly even attractive) to American audiences. Ishiguro and Ondaatje may not be considered the most English-sounding names, but the protagonist of the former's novel *The Remains of the Day* is the very embodiment of stiff-upper-lip Englishness; meanwhile, even if the eponymous protagonist of Ondaatje's novel is not actually English, the *presumption* that he is English is one from which the novel and the film both take their title. In some ways, Anthony Minghella's film of *The English Patient* shifted its focus away from the relationship between an Indian sapper and a French-Canadian nurse and towards the relationship between the (supposed) "English Patient" of the title and the English woman with whom he has an affair. Moreover, the formal playfulness and narrative self-reflexivity of Ondaatje's novel were very much downplayed in the film. To use a term coined by the aforementioned Linda Hutcheon, many have read the novel *The English Patient* as a work of historiographic metafiction;[9] the film, however — as impressive an adaptation as it is — would sit relatively comfortably on a shelf devoted to (realist) wartime romantic drama. It would seem that, in terms of selling cinema tickets, World War II, Englishness and realism are all considered by major film stu-

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[9] See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 105–23.

dios to be safe bets. By way of comparison, the 1990s did not see major film studios scrambling to adapt Nigerian author Ben Okri's postcolonial magical realist Booker Prize-winner *The Famished Road*. Neither has there been, as yet, a big-budget screen adaptation of Indian author Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winner *The God of Small Things*. There are, then, interesting questions here about the *politics* of big-screen adaptation.

Since the millennium, more Booker Prize-winning novels been adapted for the screen, and with extremely mixed results in terms of critical and commercial success. A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, which won the Booker Prize in 1990, was adapted in 2002; J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which won in 1999, was adapted in 2008; Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which won the Booker Prize in 1981 as well as the "Best of the Booker" in both 1993 and 2008, was adapted in 2012. While the screen adaptation of *Possession* was a fairly big-budget venture, it proved a critical and commercial failure—it was met with indifference by critics and failed to make back anything like its budget of $25,000,000 at the box office. The screen adaptations of the latter two novels were both relatively small productions, each of which was met with a mixed critical reception and neither of which performed particularly well at the box office.

My focus here will be on the most critically and commercially successful recent screen adaptation of a Booker Prize-winning novel, Ang Lee's 2012 adaptation of the 2002 winner, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. The immense success of both the novel and the film has meant that many millions of people are now familiar with one, or both, of these two "Lives of Pi". Martel's novel both was and was not a surprise winner of the Booker Prize in 2002. Of the six short-listed novels that year, *Life of Pi* was not considered one of the favourites to win; however, this changed somewhat when it was accidentally announced as the winner on the Booker Prize website a week before the actual ceremony.

In a sense, the main narrative of *Life of Pi* is itself an *adaptation* of sorts. The story that the titular protagonist tells about his two hundred and twenty-seven days on a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean—a boat which he shares with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker—is, we eventually learn, a kind of *adaptation* of the story of what really happened. For instance, we learn that the protagonist's description of a hyena killing a zebra and an orang-utan on the boat, after which the tiger kills the hyena, is an *adaptation* of the story of the brutal murder of a sailor (the zebra) and Pi's mother (the orang-utan) by the ship's cook (the hyena), a murder which Pi himself—represented by the tiger—then avenged. Moreover, the titular protagonist and Martel's intra-diegetic author surrogate both seem to believe the *adaptation* to be "*the better*

story".[10] While June Dwyer argues that the story involving the animals is in fact the "real" story—and that, under pressure from his Japanese interviewers to provide a believable account of what happened to him, Pi "cook[s] up a tale of murder and cannibalism among humans rife with acts of cruelty, dominance and submission, a kind of reverse beast fable where human beings are substituted for the actual animals in his real story"[11]—this would seem to be an erroneous reading of the novel. While Dwyer puts great emphasis on the *believability* of the interactions between Pi and Richard Parker on the lifeboat to anyone who has studied animal behaviour, she rather neglects to comment on the verisimilitude of other parts of Pi's "animal" story (such as, for instance, the floating, carnivorous island that he visits). While Dwyer does acknowledge that, "like the Japanese", she is "making a choice as to which version of Pi's story to believe",[12] the question at the heart of the novel is not so much which is the "real" story (which actually seems fairly straightforward) but, rather, which is the *better* story. Dwyer is right to privilege the "animal" story over the "human" one, but not because the former is the "real" story; the point is not that the (real) "human" story involving cannibalism is simply more familiar or easier to believe, but that the human "acts of cruelty, dominance and submission"[13] which Pi witnesses are *more effectively conveyed* in the (fictional) "animal" story than they are in the straightforward (real) "human" story. As such, *Life of Pi* is a novel which explicitly endorses adaptation. In theory, then, what better Booker Prize-winning novel to adapt?

In fact, adapting a text like *Life of Pi* poses a great many problems. Ultimately the film would prove a great critical and commercial success; Ang Lee won a Best Director Academy Award for it—his second after *Brokeback Mountain*—and this was just one of *Life of Pi*'s four Academy Awards from a total of eleven nominations. However, Lee claims that when he read Martel's novel for the first time, well before he was asked to consider adapting it, his first thought upon finishing reading was "nobody in his right mind would make this into a movie."[14] Lee's comment here relates most obviously

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[10] Yann Martel, *Life of Pi: A Novel* (2001; Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), 63. Italics in the original.

[11] June Dwyer, "Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and the Evolution of the Shipwreck Narrative," *Modern Language Studies* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 18–19.

[12] Dwyer, "Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and the Evolution of the Shipwreck Narrative," 21.

[13] Dwyer, "Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and the Evolution of the Shipwreck Narrative," 18.

[14] Ang Lee, introduction to *The Making of "Life of Pi": A Film; A Journey*, by Jean-

to the *technical* challenges posed by some of the things that feature within the novel's narrative: to name a few, a tiger, a hyena, an orang-utan, hundreds of thousands of meerkats, storms and a floating, carnivorous island. Of course, such challenges would ultimately be overcome by some extremely impressive CGI (computer-generated imagery), as well as some extremely impressive art direction. However, Lee and his collaborators would also face serious challenges in terms of narrative form. For instance, a radically unreliable narrator—protagonist who tells two very different stories in two very different ways, not to mention an intradiegetic surrogate author through whom both of those stories are mediated.

McFarlane makes a distinction "between those novelistic elements which can be *transferred* and those which require *adaptation proper*, the former essentially concerned with narrative, which functions irrespective of medium, and the latter with *enunciation*".[15] By "narrative" he means "a series of (more or less) causally connected events"; by "enunciation" he refers to "all those elements of the work responsible for the display of this narrative".[16] So for McFarlane, while narrative can be transferred, enunciation—elements such as "character, atmosphere, tone, [and] point of view"—require "*adaptation proper*."[17] One of the interesting things about adapting the novel *Life of Pi* is that the *narrative* of the novel is such that it cannot simply be *transferred*—it requires "*adaptation proper*".

So how does the film script of *Life of Pi*—written by David Magee, with significant creative and editorial input from Lee—navigate the challenges posed by Martel's novel? Firstly, the intradiegetic author-surrogate becomes a character in the film. This figure, who is played by Rafe Spall, remains unnamed; he is referred to in the film's credits simply as "Writer". Like Martel's author-surrogate in the novel, he is a Canadian author who hears about Pi in Bombay and then seeks him out in Canada, where he (Pi) is now living. He interviews the adult Pi about his experiences as a young man, and it is these interviews that constitute the film's narrative frame. Jean-Christophe Castelli notes that, for "Lee, the circumstance of the story's telling, the fact that *Life of Pi* was an exchange between two people, was a fundamental part of what drove the story;" as a result, "the writer grew into an on-screen character" and it is "the writer, not the Japanese investigators depicted in the novel, who has to make a leap of faith".[18]

  Cristophe Castelli (New York: Harper Design, 2012), 14.

[15] McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, 195. Italics in the original.

[16] McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, 195.

[17] McFarlane, *Novel to Film*, 196.

[18] Castelli, *The Making of "Life of Pi,"* 19.

Interestingly, the figure of the "Writer" in the film is about as close to Martel's novel's author-surrogate as possible; in casting Spall, Lee chose an actor who bears a physical resemblance to Martel (Spall, who is British, affects a Canadian accent throughout the film). However, there is a notable difference between the adult Pi of the novel and the adult Pi of the film. Most notably, in Ang Lee's film, the mature Pi still has an Indian accent, with no discernible trace of North American inflection. In contrast, at the beginning of the novel, when Martel's author-surrogate hears Pi's voice for the first time he describes it as having "an Indian *lilt* to *its Canadian accent*."[19] In both the novel and the film Pi is an Indian migrant to North America, and on one level his story of a journey that involves extreme hardship and adversity stands for migration more broadly. A number of critics have commented on Pi professing—as he does in both the novel and the film—to be an ardent follower of three different major religions (Christianity, Islam and Hinduism). What has been somewhat overlooked is that one of the functions of Pi having three different religions is that he is, to some extent, symbolic of the figure of "the migrant" more broadly. Regardless, in the opening stages of the novel, the author-surrogate not only refers to Pi's "*Canadian accent*", but also states that it "*seem[s] natural*" to tell Pi's story "*in his [Pi's] voice*",[20] for which we should presumably read in Pi's *Canadian* voice with its *slight* Indian lilt. It is notable that, in his screen adaptation, Lee chose to downplay, rather than emphasise, the protagonist's North-Americanness.

In the final scene of the film, Pi reveals his "second story" to the writer—that is, the story in which there are no animals on the lifeboat and no magical islands, and in which Pi's mother and a sailor were killed by the ship's cook, who Pi himself then killed. The writer notes the parallels between the two stories: "Both the zebra and the sailor broke their leg, and the hyena killed the zebra and the orang-utan. So, the hyena is the cook, the sailor is the zebra, your [Pi's] mother is the orang-utan, and you're ... the tiger."[21] Pi replies "Can I ask you something? ... I've told you two stories about what happened out on the ocean. Neither explains what caused the sinking of the ship, and no one can prove which story is true and which is not. In both stories, the ship sinks, my family dies, and I suffer."[22] Pi then asks the writer which of the two stories he prefers. In response, the writer affirms that the

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[19] Martel, *Life of Pi*, xi. Italics added.

[20] Martel, *Life of Pi*, xi–xii. Italics in the original.

[21] Ang Lee, dir., *Life of Pi* (2012; 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2013), DVD, chap. 27.

[22] Lee, dir., *Life of Pi*, chap. 27.

first story — "the one with the tiger" — is "the better story".[23] The writer tells Pi that it is "an amazing story", and asks, "will you really let me write it?", to which Pi replies, "Of course."[24] Upon learning that Pi has a wife and children, the writer then says to Pi "So your story does have a happy ending?" to which Pi replies, "Well, that's up to you — the story's yours now."[25] As the film ends, then, the writer is about to begin work on the novel *Life of Pi*. Accordingly, for the audience of Ang Lee's *Life of Pi*, it is very much as if we have just witnessed the interview that is the source material for the novel from which the film was adapted. Lee's screen adaptation, then, directs its audience (back) to Yann Martel's novel, and yet at the same time seeks in some ways to displace the novel as "original text". Indeed, one might watch Ang Lee's film *Life of Pi* and then decide to read Yann Martel's novel not because one wants to see where the film *came from*, but because one wants to see what *came of* the conversation one witnessed in the film. Somewhat paradoxically, Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* is a screen adaption which casts the novel on which it is based *as the adaptation*. In this way, the film displays a kind of reverence for the novel — explicitly directing its audience towards it — but at the same time it playfully seeks to usurp the novel's status as "original". As per Hutcheon's theorisation of adaptation, film and novel here become intertexts of one another, with assumptions about originality and hierarchy disrupted.

It is notable that *Life of Pi* is not the only recent, high-profile, high-budget screen adaptation that has sought to playfully disrupt notions of originality and hierarchy by casting the novels on which they are based as adaptations rather than as "source material". Joe Wright's 2007 adaptation of Ian McEwan's Booker-shortlisted novel *Atonement* does something similar to Lee's *Life of Pi*. At the end of McEwan's novel, we discover that protagonist Briony has been our narrator all along, and that she has fictionalised the "true" events of her life as a gesture of "atonement" to two people whom she wronged as a child. Again, in the screen adaptation, an interview is used as a framing device for the narrative. Briony draws her interviewer's attention to the novel that she has written — a novel borne of events in her life that the film's audience has just witnessed — and again it is possible for the audience to finish watching the film and then seek out McEwan's novel not because they want to see where the film came from, but because they want to see what was written by the character in the film. Much like Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* ends with a substantial narrative twist which

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[23] Lee, dir., *Life of Pi*, chap. 27.
[24] Lee, dir., *Life of Pi*, chap. 27.
[25] Lee, dir., *Life of Pi*, chap. 27.

calls into question everything that has gone before it, and which makes the reader aware that much of what they have read has been fabricated by an intradiegetic narrator. McFarlane characterises "narrative" as something that can be "transferred", but both of these novels have *narratives* which are unusual in that they require "adaptation proper". It is interesting that the screen adaptations of both are adaptations which capitalise on (rather than shy away from) that quality by playing with many of the assumptions surrounding adaptation.

A somewhat less successful (but extremely high-profile) example of a recent screen adaptation which has sought to playfully subvert notions of "original text" and "adaptation" is the 2013 film *The Great Gatsby*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Tobey Maguire and Carey Mulligan. A classic of American literature that pre-dates the Booker Prize by more than four decades, *The Great Gatsby* had already been adapted for the screen four times before Baz Luhrmann decided that he would direct the fifth. The critical reception for Luhrmann's film was mixed at best; one critic memorably described watching Luhrmann handle F. Scott Fitzgerald's prose as akin to watching a gorilla play with a Fabergé egg.[26] One aspect of Luhrmann's film that distinguishes it from other screen adaptations of *The Great Gatsby* (we can assume that this was not a technique used in the now-lost 1926 silent film) is that, like Lee's *Life of Pi* and Wright's *Atonement*, it ends by casting the novel from which it is adapted as the "adaption" rather than the "original". In the final scene of Luhrmann's film, it transpires that the narrative of Fitzgerald's novel is something that the film's depressive alcoholic Nick Carraway writes at the behest of his therapist (as in the two films discussed above, a conversation between two people—in this case a session between a patient and a therapist, rather than an interview—is used to occasion the film's narrative). Quotes from Fitzgerald's novel appear in Nick's handwriting on the screen, and it would seem that the audience is intended to finish watching the film and seek out the "memoir" that Toby Maguire's Nick has written in order to exorcise himself of his ghosts. Seemingly not content with simply misreading the novel, Luhrmann's film demands that others go away and misread it too. Still, while it is easy to accuse Luhrmann's film of luxuriating in the very kind of glitz and excess that Fitzgerald's novel denounces—and of misunderstanding a number of the novel's key characters (Nick Carraway in particular)—it is nonetheless interesting that Luhrmann's film represents yet

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[26] See Sam Jordinson, "*The Great Gatsby* meets Baz Lurhmann," *Guardian*, May 22, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/may/22/great-gatsby-baz-luhrmann-reading-group.

another recent, prominent adaptation of a well-loved novel which attempts to subvert notions of "originality".

In the respective fictional universes of the recent films *Life of Pi*, *Atonement* and *The Great Gatsby*, the narratives of the novels on which each film is based are cast as "adaptations" of events that take place in the films. Whatever we think of the relative success of each of these films, this undoubtedly represents an interesting development in recent big-screen adaptations of "well-loved" novels. Firstly, it is interesting that some film-makers—and indeed some major film studios—have, as in the case of *Life of Pi* and *Atonement*, started to embrace novels whose narratives are unusual in that they require "adaptation proper". Moreover, adaptations of such novels have sought to playfully disrupt received notions of the "originality" of "source material" and of the hierarchical, supposedly unidirectional relationship between adapted texts and adaptations; they have sought to embrace the notion that, as Hutcheon puts it, considered "from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality".[27]

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[27] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 8.