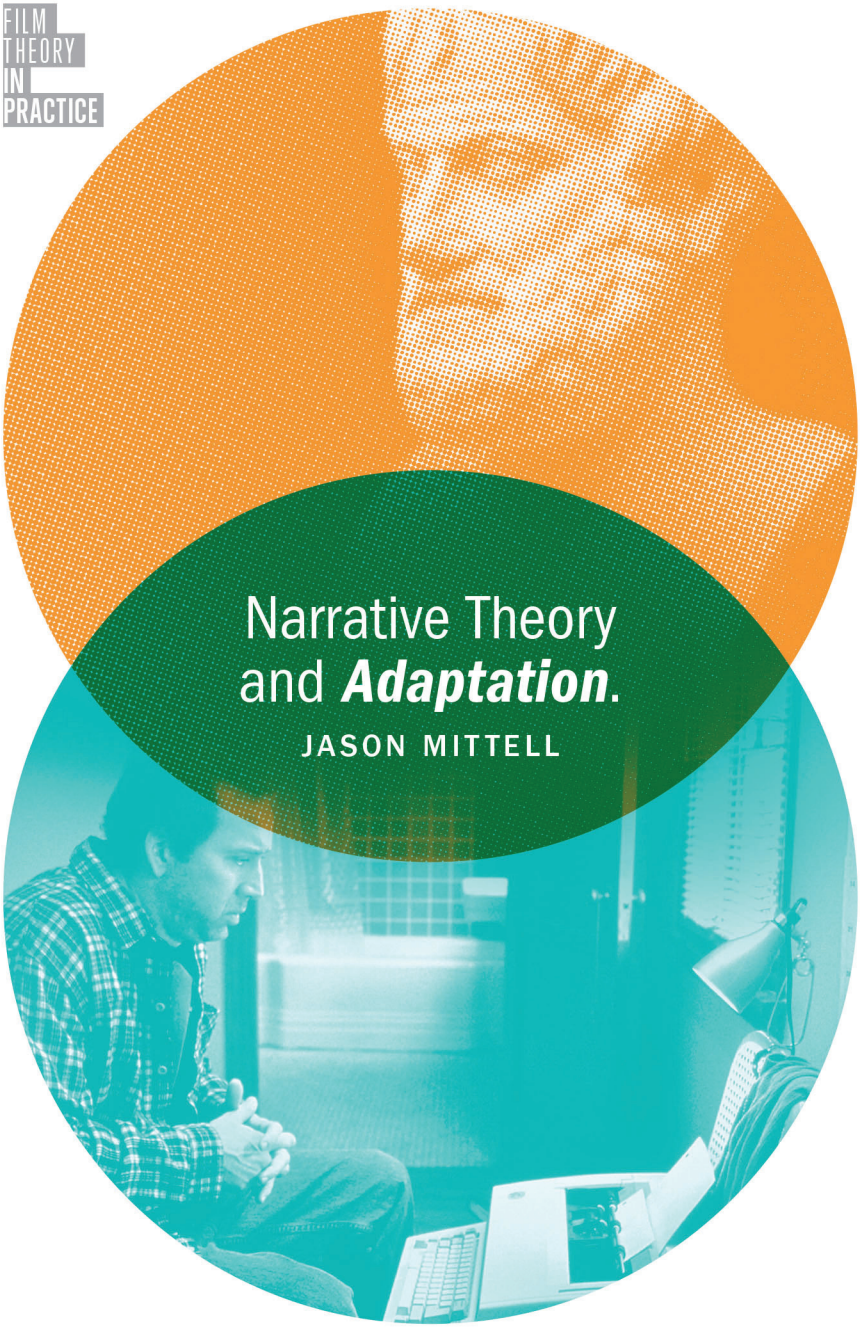
FILM THEORY IN PRACTICE



Narrative Theory and *Adaptation*.

JASON MITTELL

BLOOMSBURY

Narrative Theory and *Adaptation*.

FILM THEORY IN PRACTICE

Series Editor: Todd McGowan

Editorial Board

Slavoj Žižek, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
Joan Copjec, Brown University, USA
Hilary Neroni, University of Vermont, USA
Jennifer Friedlander, Pomona College, USA
Fabio Vighi, University of Cardiff, UK
Hugh Manon, Clark University, USA
Paul Eisenstein, Otterbein University, USA
Hyon Joo Yoo, University of Vermont, USA
Louis-Paul Willis, University of Quebec, Canada

FILM THEORY IN PRACTICE

Narrative Theory and *Adaptation*.

JASON MITTELL

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

BLOOMSBURY
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2017

© Jason Mittell, 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-0838-3
PB: 978-1-5013-0840-6
ePDF: 978-1-5013-0841-3
ePub: 978-1-5013-0839-0

Series: Film Theory in Practice

Cover design: Alice Marwick
Cover image © Shutterstock (Top)/still from ADAPTATION (2002) © COLUMBIA PICTURES/THE KOBAL COLLECTION/KALLER, BEN (Bottom)

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

CONTENTS

Introduction 1
1 Narrative theory 13
2 Narrative theory and *Adaptation.* 67
Conclusion 123

Further reading 137
Index 140

Introduction

Adaptation. is an exceptional film.[1]

I do not mean "exceptional" in the sense of unusually good or outstanding; although there might be a strong case to make for *Adaptation.*'s exceptional quality, that is not the goal of this book. Instead, I mean that *Adaptation.*, a 2002 film directed by Spike Jonze and written by Charlie and Donald Kaufman, is truly an exception in terms of how it works as a film, especially a film produced by a major Hollywood studio and starring A-list Hollywood actors.

One of *Adaptation.*'s many exceptions that this book explores is its relationship to film theory. In most instances, film theory helps us understand a film differently, uncovering new layers, deep structures, and alternate meanings. In some cases, we might contend that film theory is necessary to *truly* understand a film, revealing its power and meaning. But perhaps unique in the context of Hollywood filmmaking, *Adaptation.* actually requires some film theory simply to make sense of it at all, demanding awareness of a theoretical framework to comprehend the narrative and figure out what happens over the course of the film. This book uses an exceptional film to explore a set of critical tools that fall under the broad umbrella of narrative theory, but these tools are just as useful to analyze films that are far more conventional, ordinary, and typical of what Hollywood or other national cinemas produce.

The term "theory" needs a bit of explanation, especially before diving into its exceptional role in *Adaptation.* A theory generally explains something by positing general principles or patterns that are broader than the specific thing being analyzed. For a practical example, you can install a doorknob just by

putting the pieces where they seem to belong or following specific instructions that come with the doorknob; however, to really comprehend why the doorknob springs back into place requires an understanding of the physics principle of elasticity, a broader theory that goes far beyond the particularities of doorknobs or even springs. Understanding theories of elasticity could be useful if you want to build your own doorknob either as an amateur or as a professional engineer, or it might be the topic of more abstract research comparing the elastic properties of various materials within different environments. Thus theory helps us move from the particular to the general, and deepens both practical understanding and more abstract analysis.

This is not a book about doorknobs or theories of elasticity. Rather it is a book about film and narrative theory. We can generally make sense of a film's story without any recourse to narrative theory (with the notable exception of *Adaptation.*!), but narrative theory is useful for a deeper understanding of how any specific film might relate to other films or even storytelling in other media. Some narrative theories are useful for analyzing the mechanics of storytelling, highlighting the structures and techniques that are common to a wide range of stories. Other narrative theories help explain the relationship between a specific story and other factors, such as authorship or the process of adaptation. Still other narrative theories aim to understand how the consumers of a story, whether a novel's readers or a film's viewers, comprehend the story being told to them. All of these theoretical topics can be useful for critics striving to understand film narratives on a deeper level, as well as for prospective storytellers looking to apply the insights from such theories in crafting and improving their own film narratives.

This book is a critical analysis of a single film in light of a broader theoretical tradition, not a screenwriting manual for budding film storytellers. However, unlike most works of academic narrative theory, it does consider screenwriting manuals and their various guidelines and principles within its analysis. Thus while it firmly lives within the realm of *critical theory*, with its goals of analysis and examination of existing works,

the book explores the related realm of *practical theory*, where such theoretical ideas can be applied to create new narratives. As discussed in Chapter 2, *Adaptation.* is similarly invested in highlighting the role of theory in the creative process, with a prominent work of practical theory serving as a major plot point and a theorist even appearing as a significant character. Thus this book tries to straddle the abstract generalities of academic theory with the grounded particularities of both screenwriting and critical analysis of specific works.

The cornerstones of narrative theory

A central but deceptively simple term in the study of narrative is *text*, which is often used to reference the specific work being analyzed, regardless of medium—a text could be a book, a film, a video game, or a pop song. However, as posited by cultural critic Roland Barthes, the concept of text has important differences from the idea of a *work* of art or culture.[2] While he charts a number of these distinctions, the key difference regards a work as a static cultural object, while a text is a dynamic cultural practice. Considering a film as a static work limits the analysis solely to what appears on-screen within the movie's running time, subjecting the work to a close reading to understand the intrinsic meanings and forms found within. Treating a film as a text considers that its meaning only comes to life through the practice of viewing and thinking about it, and that any critical understanding must be lodged in its contexts of production, reception, and broader cultural circulation. While there are certainly elements of a film that can be examined in isolation from its context, this book embraces a broader sense of textuality where context is always important to understand how films make meaning.

One of the main differences between narrative theory and many other theoretical paradigms that are central to film studies

concerns the core question it seeks to answer. The majority of film theories are interpretive, looking to analyze the meanings of a film and connect them to larger cultural issues, such as the representation of gender or racial identities through feminist or postcolonial theories, or the perpetuation of dominant norms and systems of power via the concept of ideology. Narrative theory takes a different approach to studying meaning: instead of asking "What does this film mean?," it asks "How does this film mean?" Such an approach considers how meanings are constructed and conveyed via the design and structure of films and other texts, with primary attention to the patterns of storytelling. Often such an approach is called *formalism*, emphasizing structures and patterns of meaning-making over the meanings themselves.

This is not to suggest that narrative theory is not useful for analyzing the meaning and politics of films or other storytelling media; the core concepts of narrative theory are flexible enough to be integrated into other theoretical traditions to answer a broad array of critical questions. For instance, scholars have married feminist theory to narrative theory to explore how various narrative structures are gendered, such as soap opera seriality or melodrama, provoking emotional responses that are culturally coded as feminine. Likewise, ideology theory often looks at how films reinforce dominant meanings, using narrative theory to understand how plot structures and narrative resolutions work to normalize the status quo and close down opposing ideas or possibilities. No single theory is sufficient to answer all of the relevant questions that a critic might ask of a film, so it is important to be open to combining theoretical models as appropriate to broaden our understanding of any film. But for the purposes of this book (until the conclusion), our analytic toolbox will be limited to narrative theory to understand both its possibilities and limitations to unpacking the ways that films make meaning.

While Chapter 1 explores many facets of narrative theories in depth, most of these ideas are built upon a shared set of

cornerstones that are essential to make sense of the entire field. Storytelling is such a universal component of human culture that we rarely stop to think of what we really mean by "story" in exact terms, but narrative theory requires a precise definition of story and its related terms. For a narrative theorist, *story* refers to the narrative world and all that happens within it, including the characters, events, and setting. At one level, this is a commonsense definition—if you try to recall the story of a favorite film, you will probably think about what happens to the characters in a specific setting. Take the example of the classic fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood," whose story consists of a young girl in the woods bringing food to her grandmother, only to be stalked by a wolf who masquerades as the grandmother, with Red rescued in the end by a hunter. As with most folk tales, there are numerous variations and adaptations that change the story elements: Red might be a girl or young woman, she might be rescued by a lumberjack instead or fight the wolf herself, it might be set in various places and times, and in some retellings Red and the wolf might even enter into an overtly sexualized relationship. These are all changes within the story itself altering what happens within the fictional world, including characters, events, and setting.

However, these are not the only ways that the narrative might be altered. A story is only accessible to us through a specific instance of storytelling, usually called the *narrative discourse*, encompassing the various elements and strategies used to communicate a story. The same story can be told in countless different ways, which greatly impacts what sense we make of a narrative. One could tell "Little Red Riding Hood" solely from Red's perspective, providing insight into her thought processes and limited by her knowledge and experiences, or it could include the experiences of other characters by portraying the encounter between the wolf and grandmother. One could narrate the story chronologically, or jumble the timeframe by starting with Red's discovery of the wolf at grandmother's house, and flashback to her earlier story. A telling might take a long time to portray Red's journey

through the woods to create a sense of danger and exhaustion, or simply skip over the travels in a single sentence or film edit. In these various versions, the story remains the same, as the same characters have the same experiences in the same setting, but the storytelling changes dramatically by altering the narrative discourse. One of the central goals of narrative theory is accounting for how different techniques of narrative discourse impact our understanding and the cultural impact of stories.

This distinction between story and discourse are foundational to understanding narrative. Narrative theorist Seymour Chatman offers a succinct summary of this key distinction: "The story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*."[3] Most narrative theory builds upon this crucial differentiation between story and discourse, considering how the telling of a story is distinct from, but interwoven with, the story itself. Such a distinction is best understood in practice rather than abstract theory. Take the popular animated film *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013)—as a children's film, it would appear to be fairly simple in its storytelling, aiming to communicate clearly to young viewers. *Frozen*'s story is quite straightforward: Princess Elsa, who has magical ice powers, exiles herself after accidentally freezing her home of Arendelle, leading her sister Anna to venture out to bring her back and save the kingdom. However, the film's narrative discourse is far less conventional than it might appear. The film starts with the girls as children, portraying the momentous events of their childhoods over the course of mere minutes—including jumping forward fourteen years within only four minutes of screen time. Such temporal compression relies upon ellipses in the narrative discourse, cuing viewers to follow the time jumps using storytelling devices like voice-over narration, on-screen captions, descriptive song lyrics, and the rapid aging of the animated characters. This sequence is a clear instance of the difference between story and discourse time, as the characters experience time in a strict chronology, while we are presented only the key moments of their backstory to

understand the events that will play out with less compression for the bulk of the film.

The distinction between story and discourse is not just about the use of narrative time, but also includes other facets such as narrative knowledge. Again, *Frozen* provides a good example—one of the film's central storylines is Anna meeting, falling in love with, and getting engaged to Hans, all over the course of one day and a single musical number. When Anna runs off to find Elsa, she leaves Hans in charge of Arendelle, a job that he appears to accomplish effectively. It isn't until the film's climax that we learn of Hans's true motives: he has manipulated Anna into marriage in an attempt to seize the throne. Certainly there were prior moments in the storyworld where Hans's behavior was nefarious, but the narrative discourse withholds sharing such information until Anna herself learns of his deception—while throughout the film we have learned much narrative information about other characters that Anna does not yet know, it restricts our knowledge concerning Hans to what she knows. This revelation is a prime example of how narrative discourse can selectively conceal and reveal story information, highlighting how storytelling manages audience knowledge to maximize dramatic impact. One could tell the story of *Frozen* differently by revealing Hans's treachery early, creating more suspense and anxiety about what will happen when Anna learns of his betrayal—this would significantly change the narrative discourse, and thus our experience of viewing the film, without actually changing anything that happens within the story itself. To effectively analyze a film's narrative, we must always be attentive to how both the story and discourse work both distinctly and in tandem.

There is a third important category of any narrative: its *medium*, or the format that a particular narrative takes. The same story can be told in a wide range of different media, from novel to comic book to live-action film to animated film to videogame. One common tenet of narrative theory is that storytelling is medium independent, meaning that narrative structures and techniques can be used across different media.

This is certainly true to a degree, as a flashback could be used in a comic book just as easily as a film. However, there are some techniques that are more tied to medium; for instance, a first-person perspective takes on a far different effect when you can read a character's internal thoughts in a novel rather than visually representing their experiences in a film. Likewise, a videogame creates an interactive experience where both narrative discourse and story can change in reaction to a player's actions, a facet of storytelling that is not easily translatable to media like television or comics. Thus we need to be attentive to how a narrative's medium helps shape its discourse and the storytelling possibilities that any given medium allows, encourages, or restricts. This attentiveness to medium is particularly important in analyzing an adaptation, as the shift from a book to film involves choices and transformations that can be directly impacted by the dual narrative media, as is directly portrayed within *Adaptation*.

One of the medium-based elements that is particularly central to the study of film is the role of time and temporality as a dimension of storytelling. Every narrative has multiple layers of temporality that correspond to the three categories of story, discourse, and medium. *Story time* is the temporality as it occurs within the storyworld, which is typically linear and chronological; unless time travel is a facet of a particular storyworld, characters experience their universes as a string of moments one after another without interruption or repetition, just as we do in our everyday lives. *Discourse time* is the temporal sequence, duration, frequency, and selectivity as presented in the storytelling, not as it is experienced by the characters. Virtually every film involves compressions in the discourse time by eliminating moments via ellipses and selective presentation—these can be broad reductions, as with *Frozen* compressing fourteen years into minutes, or typical editing patterns that present only the key moments and events in a narrative to maintain interest and active pacing. Some films play more overtly with temporality, such as *Pulp Fiction*

(Quentin Tarantino, 1994), whose discourse time is nonlinear, jumping around between plotlines and perspectives with some repetition and one overt flashback. However, the film's story time remains straightforward, commencing twenty years before the main action in a flashback to Butch's childhood when he received his father's gold watch, and ultimately concluding with Butch and Marcellus escaping captivity—these two scenes are presented back-to-back in the middle of the movie, highlighting the film's atemporal sequence. When watching *Pulp Fiction* for the first time, it is unclear precisely what the story's linear chronology might be, but viewers do attempt to piece together a coherent storyworld that fits together logically; rewatching the film results in even more coherence as patterns and continuities emerge, allowing viewers to draw connections and chart chronologies.

One of the main distinctions between literature and screen-based media like film and television is how they treat temporality in the third level of medium. The time it takes to consume a book is quite variable and idiosyncratic to particular readers, as we all read at different paces and might sometimes reread sections or take lengthy pauses between chapters. Film and television are much more uniform in how viewers consume narratives, leading to particular norms of *screen time* structured by the medium. Film traditionally has been viewed within a strict temporal structure: scheduled by cinema screenings and running straight through from start to finish. The rise of DVDs and streaming in the 2000s has transformed the norms of screen time, as viewers can now watch films on their own schedules, as well as pausing, rewatching, and skipping around in a manner more comparable to reading a book than traditional cinema screenings. However, screen media are still more regimented by length, with norms of feature film duration that are much more prescriptive than lengths of books, and films are still designed primarily to be viewed straight through in a single sitting much more than most other media.