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Straight to the source? Where adaptations, artworks, historical films, and novels connect

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## Straight to the source? Where adaptations, artworks, historical films and novels connect

### Keywords

Adaptation, history, historical novel, historical film, sources, origin story, Tracy Chevalier, re-enactment.

### Abstract

Responding to several recent interventions in adaptation studies that have argued for history-as-adaptation, this article develops a sustained examination of how page-to-screen adaptations may be understood as structured and interpreted in ways analogous to the historical film. Considering the relationship between historical screen texts and the historical novel, including the many novel-to-film adaptations of such stories, the article identifies a distinct subset of adaptations in which artworks and literary works are engaged as the 'source' for fictional and semi-fictional narratives that ostensibly address the circumstances of their creation. Re-purposing the term 'origin story' to characterise these stories, the works of historical novelist Tracy Chevalier are posited as examples of this creative adaptive practice. In addition, this paper argues for the trope of 'bringing-to-life' and the associated domain of re-enactment as key modes, deeply resonant since the earliest phases of cinema technology, for figuring both the page-to-screen adaptation and historical film. Finally, the 2015 historical biopic and adaptation *Trumbo* and its relationship to a range of sources are examined in the light of ideas proposed in this paper.

### Introduction

At first glance, and depending perhaps on one's scholarly background, the collocation of Adaptations and History might suggest a relationship of the type associated with the Venn diagram, of the subset or intersection; adaptations that address history, or histories that are adaptations. However, sustained scrutiny reveals a closer and more complex relationship. Recent years have seen a productive ebullition of adaptation studies scholarship in this area that has probed disciplinary boundaries and begun to chart pertinent correspondences: a process this paper seeks to further. Lawrence Raw and Defne Ersin Tutan have, for example, proposed that 'all historical documents be treated as *adaptations*' (10): an intervention that claims an especially broad jurisdiction for adaptation. Relatedly, in his 2015 article 'History as Adaptation' Thomas Leitch has pointed to the serial reinterpretations of the historical record as evidence that 'the writing of history amounts to the adaptation of earlier histories' (10). In 2017, Tutan would re-state this relationship in a fashion that seems unequivocally to claim history for adaptation studies:

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Having thus far produced its most fruitful work in exploring the relation between literature and film, studies in adaptation should by no means be limited to this paradigm. Indeed, every version of history should be regarded as a rewriting, essentially an adaptation. (576)

This paper endeavours to examine the relationship between adaptation and literary and screen texts which engage with history, including consideration of the many ways in which they abut, overlap, and share preoccupations. It takes as its jumping-off point the work of Linda Hutcheon. Both Imelda Whelehan and Frans Weiser have drawn attention to connections between ideas pursued in Hutcheon's work on literary Postmodernism - *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) – and in her later volume *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). Hutcheon describes as 'historiographic metafiction' (*Poetics* 5) postmodern literary works which, in Whelehan's (2012) summary, address the past 'self-consciously and with an acceptance that what constitutes "history" is fluid, changing and contested' (273). In his own elaboration of Hutcheon's term, Weiser describes 'self-reflexive, iconoclastic literature that highlights how the discourses of history and fiction are equally human constructs' (4). For Whelehan, scrutinizing neo-Victorian novels and their renderings on screen, the continuity that may be discerned across Hutcheon's analyses relates to her focus on the haunted, shadowed, nature of particular works and the seeming desire of their makers to recast what has gone before. Similarly, for Weiser, addressing historical revisionism in literary and film studies, it is Hutcheon's attention to the common 'doubled' nature of her subjects – postmodernism and adaptation – that resonates. Hutcheon has noted of adaptations 'the overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealingly called "sources"' (*Theory* 3). In drawing attention to how adaptation's invocation of an anterior version overlaps with the terminology of history<sup>1</sup>, Hutcheon provides a useful way to commence a consideration of adaptation and history as mutually-inflected.

#### Doubles and sources

Robert Rosenstone describes in *History on Film/Film on History* (2012) the default position of most academic historians faced with a historical film: 'Our basic reaction is to think a film is really a book somehow transformed to the screen, which means that it should do what we expect a book to do: get things right. This viewpoint does not belong to academics alone, but is shared by reviewers and critics' (40-41). In its figuration of a book-to-film process, and especially of the presumed status of the literary original as criterion for evaluation, these are terms and ideas that will seem eerily familiar to the adaptation studies scholar. Similarly, in his earlier work *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (1995) Rosenstone characterises a frequent perspective on history films as one that 'sees the picture as a book transformed to the screen' (48). He argues that historians need to acquire the facility to better engage with history on film and to recognize that it

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cannot be assessed using the same criteria as written history, but what really catches the eye for anyone who has ever taken or delivered a literature/film course is the degree to which the positions and worldviews he charts chime with equivalent debates and discourses in adaptation studies.

Although the dragon of 'fidelity' as the presumed ideal of adaptation has been slain time and again by scholars in adaptation studies, it remains a perennially popular criterion in reviews of and popular responses to 'literature-on-screen' in much the same fashion as Rosenstone describes for history-on-screen. According to such an account, the book has necessarily and inevitably done it first, definitively, fully, and best. It – story/history<sup>2</sup> – may be decanted to the screen, but any assessment of that subsequent screen version must be measured against the benchmark of the original version. As Weiser observes, the deployment of such language to assess history-on-screen 'bears a striking resemblance to "fidelity discourse"' (6) in adaptation.

In 'Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory' (2012) Thomas Leitch argues that 'the assumption of fidelity is really an appeal to anteriority' (115) and, applied to screen renderings of history, this acquires particular significance. If history is understood as signifying 'events in the past' rather than the rendering or interpretation of such events, irrespective of form or medium, then that history is necessarily anterior to any rendition or representation of those events. If history is understood in a sense closer to historiography, as dealing with the study and process of examining events from the past to produce history (or histories) then the assumption that the first and definitive account will take the form of printed matter places the screen rendering of history at an additional remove from the events to which it refers. In the latter scenario the historical film or television programme is subject to a type of fidelity double jeopardy, liable to judgment against (at least) two anterior versions. As Leitch observes of the reasons for the staying power of fidelity as a criterion in adaptation, they are 'less theoretical than institutional' (114-115) and essentially work to assert the place of literature over cinema (and, of course, the equivalent ordering in respect of their disciplines). *Mutatis mutandis* – though, in truth, little requires changing in the figure – history-on-screen has also been assailed for institutional reasons, derided for its inadequacy to both the past and to history-in-print by practitioners of the latter.

As well as examining how history-on-screen is received, Rosenstone also considers how it is made. Again, his account of the roles and interventions of filmmakers engaged with prior materials is markedly similar to equivalent accounts of the work of adapters toiling to transpose a literary original: '*compression* or *condensation*, the process by which several historical characters or moments are collapsed into one; *displacements*, which move an event from one timeframe to another; *alterations* in which a character engages in actions or expresses sentiments that may have belonged to a different historical figure or to no one at all' (*History on Film* 44). All these

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3 manoeuvres are readily identifiable as either analogous or identical to adaptive techniques  
4 employed in the transposition of a story from novel to screen. That the scale or extent of the source  
5 material – whether the *longue durée* of history or the heft of the Victorian three decker novel –  
6 requires judicious omissions to fit into the more limited parameters of a feature film is common to  
7 both endeavours, as is the desire to re-order events better to serve the demands of a coherent  
8 story, and the practice of ‘updating’ – dialogue, opinions, sensibilities – to better align the new text  
9 to the viewpoints and ideological norms of contemporary audiences. Hence, Rosenstone and  
10 Parvulescu’s observation that the historical film works ‘audiovisually, metonymically, dramatically,  
11 emotionally, and by administering temporality differently’ (7) serves almost as well to summarize  
12 the likely changes from novel to film as it does to characterise the shift from history to history-on-  
13 film.  
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16 Whilst television has often been the medium for screen renderings of history, including many  
17 adaptations, which are broadly akin to history-on-film,<sup>3</sup> the particular adaptive relationship between  
18 TV and books may be considered in another context relevant to the representation of history,  
19 namely the genre or format of history programming that features a ‘talking head’ presenter. If  
20 historian/broadcasters such as Simon Schama, writer and presenter of *A History of Britain* (BBC,  
21 2000-2002) and David Starkey, writer and presenter of *Monarchy* (Channel Four, 2004-2007) both of  
22 whom are the authors of books associated with their series, are to be understood in terms of  
23 adaptation, then it cannot be in the conventional sense that assumes a transit from page to screen.  
24 Simone Murray’s concept of a ‘content recycling function’ (369) enacted in a ‘system of institutional  
25 interests and actors’ (373) is clearly germane to understanding how parallel screen and print  
26 versions of the same title are co-conceived, cross-promoted and mutually supporting. In this respect  
27 the transmedial relationship between this type of television history and its associated ‘companion’  
28 books differs greatly from that which inheres with the ‘quality television’ production (see Jancovich  
29 and Lyons) of the out-of-copyright historical novel, but maps closely onto equivalent television/book  
30 tie-in relationships in other genres such as natural history, culture (e.g. Melvyn Bragg’s *The  
31 Adventure of English*. ITV, 2003-2004) and especially cookery.  
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### 33 Terms and meanings

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35 An interrelationship between adaptations and historical films is also suggested by the frequency  
36 with which certain terms recur when scholars set out to define or delimit their fields. At the very  
37 least it is evident that several shared descriptors are commonly deployed which bridge these  
38 domains and, depending on the emphasis of any given scholar, are sometimes used interchangeably.  
39 For James Chapman the ‘genre label ‘historical film’ is one of several – others include ‘costume film’,  
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3 'period film' and 'heritage film' – used to describe films whose narrative is set wholly or partly in the  
4 past': a rubric that 'also includes biopics' (2). Eckart Voigts-Virchow observes 'Heritage film, costume  
5 film, period film, literary adaptation – often these terms address an overlapping corpus of films'  
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7 (123). For Ginette Vincendeau heritage film 'refers to costume films' which can also 'draw on a wider  
8 popular cultural heritage that includes historical figures and moments' (xvii-xviii). In *The Cambridge*  
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10 *Companion to Literature on Screen* Cartmell and Whelehan, also describing heritage cinema,  
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12 characterize these as 'films that endeavor to give the impression of accuracy in the representation of  
13 a literary text, historical event, or period' (2). David Eldridge makes a significant point when he  
14 contends that 'the devaluing of films lumped together as 'costume dramas', ignores a vast amount  
15 of material which is shot through with ideas of history and which tells us a great deal about the  
16 historical consciousness of the people who made them' (4). In this vein, Sue Harper's work on  
17 costume drama has contended precisely that films which do not address particular historical events  
18 or individuals but are located in a deliberately-constructed historical setting are nonetheless  
19 amenable to analysis in terms of 'the mythical and symbolic aspects of the past' (2). For Robert  
20 Burgoyne the historical film may be examined in terms of its 'variants [...] distinct subtypes such as  
21 the war film, the epic, the biographical film, the topical film, and evolving new, contemporary forms  
22 such as the metahistorical film' (2), though his taxonomy is 'limited to films which foreground  
23 historical events in a recognizable way' and hence pointedly excludes 'costume dramas and  
24 romances set in the past' (11).

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26 Evidently then an overlapping roster of terms including costume, period, heritage, biopic and epic  
27 are widely used – both by scholars whose principal interest is adaptation and by those who focus on  
28 historical film – to designate and distinguish between the texts that make up their demesne. The  
29 notion of accuracy in representation, as flagged by Cartmell and Whelehan, may be interpreted as  
30 synonymous with closeness to a literary model, but can also signify an approach to production that  
31 valorises authenticity in the painstaking creation of costumes, interiors and other aspects of *mise en*  
32 *scène*, a characteristic frequently associated with heritage film. Where the new text is based on a  
33 literary model, the rendering of a historically accurate world before the camera will often have to  
34 invent (or at least 'decide') how to figure aspects that are unspecified in the word-built original,  
35 though as Linda Troost observes, this attention to surface detail means that 'objects and possessions  
36 can become disproportionately important' (80). Indeed a familiar criticism of heritage film and  
37 television has been the extent to which it foregrounds and celebrates the trappings of wealth.  
38 Andrew Higson observes how period authenticity often eventuates in a type of political neutering in  
39 heritage adaptations: 'even those films that develop an ironic *narrative* of the past end up  
40 celebrating and legitimating the *spectacle* of one class and one cultural tradition at the expense of  
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3 others through the discourse of authenticity, and the obsession with the visual splendors of period  
4 detail' (119). Marcia Landy describes heritage films as 'offering commonsensical versions of the  
5 imperial past' (13), her figuration of common sense in this context being a Gramscian understanding  
6 in which such narratives are tied to the culture of the dominant class and where 'common sense as  
7 folklore serves tradition' (4). Although one might identify a few films set in the present which exhibit  
8 heritage characteristics, as well as a number of heritage films which do not have a literary original -  
9 *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) could qualify on both counts – overwhelmingly the heritage  
10 cycle or genre has functioned exactly at the intersection of history and adaptation. Voigts-Virchow  
11 notes how the films share 'a pastness which is divulged by costume, signalled by the "period" quality  
12 and implied in the canonized literary precursor' (123).

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21 Adaptation and history also converge significantly in terms of the history of the cinema industry and  
22 where it has sought content to be transformed by its technological possibilities. Judith Buchanan  
23 charts how, as early as the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, film sought cultural  
24 respectability and profits in borrowings 'not only of Shakespeare but also of the Bible, Dickens,  
25 Racine, Pushkin, Thackeray and other literary figures of comparable cultural 'weight'' (17). In the  
26 case of historical novels such as Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (both  
27 adapted several times as 'silent' pictures, and subsequently – again several times each – in the  
28 sound era and for television), it is self-evident that the same story could simultaneously address  
29 history, in the sense of their fictional narratives being played out against major historical events, and  
30 be freighted with the presumed virtues and audience appeal of literary prestige. Jonathan Stubbs  
31 also observes how, for early cinema, historical subject matter and literary source material, often  
32 including texts where those properties intersect, were key to the rise of more expensively produced  
33 'feature' films. These included 'historical literary adaptations such as *Antony and Cleopatra* (1908)  
34 and *Les Misérables* (1909), the historical biopics *The Life of Napoleon* (1909) and *The Life of George*  
35 *Washington* (1909), and the biblical narrative *The Life of Moses* (1909)' (63).

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Natalie Zemon Davis (2000) divides the historical film into those dramas where the central plot is  
grounded in real historical events, and those where a fictional plot is enacted against a backdrop of  
real historical events which influence that central narrative. Rosenstone applies exactly this standard  
in determining what he will and will not scrutinize as a historical film, stating in the preface to  
*History on Film/Film on History* that 'a few of the works do deal with fictional characters in historical  
settings. But I decided to focus my attention on works about documented people and events as a  
kind of necessary first step in the process of trying to understand and legitimize the history film'(xix).  
Naturally, the type of text that falls foul of such a definition is 'the costume drama, the feature set in  
a past which is no more than a kind of exotic realm for love and adventure' (xix). As James Chapman



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3 and others acknowledge, whilst this binary way of conceiving of the genre and its limits has heuristic  
4 value, it can become very muddy in application owing to the 'difficulty of assessing the relative  
5 balance of fictional and historical elements in a narrative' (3). I argue below that the tenebrous  
6 nature of the historical film, and one of the principal reasons why delimiting its bounds can be so  
7 contentious, arises from the breadth of forms and materials that have fed into its corpus from the  
8 outset and which continue to do so to the present day.

14 Georg Lukács observes 'it is not an essential need of the novel to portray significant people in  
15 significant situations' (231). His perspective on the historical novel was that the classics of that genre  
16 'represented the great figures of history as minor characters' whereas *drama*, by contrast 'demands  
17 for them a central role' (230). Examining how characters in the historical novel may be used to  
18 represent or typify social forces, conflicts and change, he contends that the 'world-historical figure' –  
19 the central character embodying such transformation – 'must be a minor figure' (230-231). Key to  
20 understanding the historical film, and its plurality, is recognizing that it would draw story materials  
21 from a great spectrum of sources that encompassed both sides of this divide. Historical novels, such  
22 as the works of Scott and Tolstoy, provided stories that featured characters who, although authorial  
23 inventions, exist in a turbulent story world that is 'historically authentic in root and branch' (247).  
24 Equally, in adapting from *inter alia* theatre, classical sources, and the Bible, the historical film would  
25 also often feature 'real' historical characters who occupied centre stage in the resulting movies as  
26 they had in their antecedent texts. Three historical epics of the 1950s – *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe*  
27 (1953), and *Ben Hur* (1959) – exemplify this distinction between major and minor characters. All  
28 three are adaptations<sup>4</sup> – of novels from 1896, 1942, and 1880 respectively – and all are located in  
29 the historical era of Christ and the early Christian church, with key plot events driven by events told  
30 in the New Testament. As such, all may be said to 'intersect' with the Christian narrative of the  
31 gospels, but emphatically not with Christ as the hero. Rather, the principal protagonists are invented  
32 characters whose stories, while undoubtedly thrilling, are driven by living in momentous times, as  
33 opposed to being the major historical figures who make the times momentous. The influence of  
34 adaptations on the screen figuration of history also extended beyond particular instances of  
35 transposition to the patterns and motifs they established for subsequent films that revisited history  
36 without any literary source. In his account of Hollywood history films in the 1950s, for example,  
37 Eldridge observes how 'movies directly concerned with medieval history consistently defined the  
38 period 'when knighthood flowered' through the filter of Sir Walter Scott's imagination [which]  
39 informed almost every medieval film Hollywood released' (16). Likewise, it seems probable that  
40 early historical adaptations which addressed the lives of known historical figures (as opposed to –  
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3 say – Scott’s invented characters) influenced the lineaments of all later biopics, irrespective of the  
4 extent to which those pictures drew from particular written originals.  
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7 Whilst it is evident that some scholars incline towards a demarcation of the historical film that  
8 hinges on whether it represents ‘documented’ individuals – and do so essentially on the basis that  
9 the resulting account should be better grounded in historical reality - it is also apparent that such a  
10 definition or emphasis raises difficulties of its own in respect of the accuracy of the resulting  
11 representation. Burgoyne ponders ‘whether the biographical historical film can reveal the  
12 complexities of history, or whether its focus on the individual agent as the crystallized expression of  
13 historical forces compromises its power of historical explanation’ (17). The sense of destiny that links  
14 many biopics – a sense fortified by the fact of their addressing already-known life stories – seems at  
15 odds with an understanding of history as driven by a multiplicity of factors and agents, including  
16 chance. Likewise the trajectory of drama’s tragic hero; plangent precisely because it is inescapably  
17 plotted. For Hayden White, it is the very writing and structuring of an account that introduces a  
18 sense of fictive unity: ‘we make sense of the world by imposing on it the formal coherency that we  
19 customarily associate with fiction’ (99). Evelyn Waugh describes part of the writer’s task as ‘putting  
20 an experience into shape’, work which necessarily involves re-casting such experience from ‘the  
21 amorphous, haphazard condition in which life presents it’ (11). For Patrick Parrinder, such a  
22 contradiction is at the heart of what novels do; they ‘characteristically both affirm and undermine  
23 historical narrative, paying lip-service to history’s importance while revealing, in a sense, its  
24 impossibility’ (95).  
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38 As Stubbs notes, biopics tend to personalize history, foregrounding heroic figures and explaining  
39 significant events in terms of the ‘charisma, heroism, and/or wisdom of great men (and occasionally  
40 women)’ (69). This potential for leeward drift toward hagiography in historical films centred on the  
41 individual is also identified in Susan Hayward’s observation that ‘often highly fictionalized, the  
42 historical film invests the moment or person with “greatness”’ (205). Millicent Marcus describes how  
43 Visconti’s adaptation of Camillo Boito’s 1882 novella *Senso* (1954) provoked an equivalent debate on  
44 the capacity of adaptation adequately to convey historical and social truths. Did the use of a  
45 historical literary model signify a surrender to the pleasures of spectacle and a distraction from  
46 representing pressing contemporary concerns, or was it ‘invested with the positive morality of Georg  
47 Lukács’ critical realism, which celebrates the kind of inquiries into the dynamics of the historical  
48 process that only the novel can achieve when endowed with “typical” characters who embody the  
49 salient conflicts of their era’ (11)? Already permeated with a longstanding ‘spirit-vs.-letter’  
50 distinction as a figure for conceiving of different approaches to adaptive practice and the  
51 interpretation of adapted texts, adaptation’s commixture with history brings the parallel criterion of  
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3 *Zeitgeist* into how we perceive adaptations that address history. Do they, whether or not they centre  
4 on documented individuals, succeed in conveying the spirit of the times? Can they achieve a  
5 *zeitgeistig* quality if they do not follow closely the 'letter' of their literary model? And, in cases where  
6 a literary work is, so to speak, interposed between history and a historical film, can we meaningfully  
7 describe that literary work itself as already an adaptation on the grounds that it adapts history?  
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12 Latterly, adaptation studies has been amenable to broad conceptions of its domain. Hutcheon's  
13 examples of the 'announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works' include 'a  
14 shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel)' (*Theory* 9) and she contends that  
15 'not every adaptation is necessarily a remediation' (170). Relatedly, Whelehan (2012) makes an  
16 equivalent claim for a species of literature-to-literature adaptation, and with a particular insistence  
17 that this need not signify adaptation as arising from a unitary point of origin: 'Neo-Victorian literary  
18 texts are themselves adaptations; even when they do not refer back to a single Urtext, they remain  
19 compatible with contemporary definitions of adaptation and appropriation' (272). The work of  
20 historical novelist Tracy Chevalier may be considered productively in light of such plastic definitions.  
21 Her works often exhibit the historical revisionism mentioned at the outset, explained by Burgoyne as  
22 the uncovering of 'chapters from the past that have been suppressed in the dominant accounts' (10)  
23 and by Murray, in the context of adaptation, as the interrogation of 'the political and ideological  
24 underpinnings of [...] source texts, translating works across cultural, gender, racial, and sexual  
25 boundaries to secure cultural space for marginalized discourses' (369). In *Remarkable Creatures*  
26 (2009) Chevalier's central characters are early nineteenth century fossil hunters Mary Anning and  
27 Elizabeth Philpot. Although the two women were real life figures, a central thrust of the narrative is  
28 that neither the society of their time, nor -- until very recently -- posterity, has afforded them due  
29 recognition for their achievements. Rather, celebrity and kudos accrued to male scholars such as  
30 Georges Cuvier and William Buckland, both of whom appear in the novel as more peripheral  
31 characters. Chevalier's narrative traces how male scientists and even well-to-do dilettantes are  
32 enabled -- by the prevailing cultural norms of the time and by a gendered stranglehold on scientific  
33 discourse and institutions -- to acquire, present to the public, and publish about the fossilised  
34 creatures discovered by Anning and Philpot. Hence, Chevalier's novel, in moving them from a  
35 footnote to central importance in a key phase of the transformation of our understanding of natural  
36 history, undertakes a restorative function. In a similar vein, her novel *The Lady and the Unicorn*  
37 (2003), which 'is fiction, yet based on sensible suppositions' (277) around the creation of the  
38 fifteenth century tapestries of that name which hang in the Musée national du Moyen Âge,  
39 describes the skills of female artisans operating in a context which sought to curtail their agency and  
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3 'Although she's not meant to weave – the Guild would fine Papa if she did – she often helps him with  
4 other work. Her father was a weaver, and she knows how to dress a loom, thread heddles, wind and  
5 sort wool, and work out how much wool and silk are needed for each tapestry, and how much time  
6 they will take to make.' (118)  
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8 It is notable that in her novels *The Lady and the Unicorn* and *Remarkable Creatures* Chevalier uses  
9 both the models that have come to be associated with historical film; principal characters who are  
10 authorial inventions in the former<sup>5</sup>, and principal characters based on documented historical figures  
11 in the latter. Whilst such catholicity is at odds with Lukács' prescription for the historical novel, many  
12 historical novelists such as Mary Renault, Massimo Manfredi, and Hilary Mantel have used the form  
13 of the novel to tell stories which centre on historical figures. Within the historical novel genre, the  
14 formula of fictional principal protagonists plus a peppering of real historical figures in cameo parts  
15 which Scott often deployed in the *Waverley* novels has become common for stories of historical  
16 adventure. This modality has found its fullest expression in series based around recurring central  
17 characters such as Patrick O'Brian's *Aubrey/Maturin* series (1969-2004) and Bernard Cornwell's  
18 *Sharpe* novels (1981-2003).  
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#### 27 Art and adaptation: 'origin stories'

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29 A thread that runs through Chevalier's *oeuvre* just as consistently as recuperative historical  
30 revisionism has been the device of using historical artworks and artefacts as portals into fictional  
31 narratives that address their creation, merging documented and invented individuals. Generally the  
32 central artworks are figured as, at least in part, inflected by the dramatic narratives she structures.  
33 Hence, the cover sleeve of *Burning Bright* (2007), set mostly in late eighteenth century London,  
34 explains how the lives of the young principal protagonists (and fictional characters) Jem Kellaway  
35 and Maggie Butterfield will intersect with that of 'their neighbour, the printer, poet and radical,  
36 William Blake'. Their coming-of-age story and Blake's famous collection of illustrated poems are  
37 presented as mutually-constitutive: 'He is a guiding spirit as Jem and Maggie navigate the  
38 unpredictable, exhilarating passage from innocence to experience. Their journey influences one of  
39 Blake's most entrancing works' (2007). The presence of Blake as a character and the development of  
40 a fictional narrative that inventively dramatizes aspects of the creation of a work is equivalent to the  
41 phenomenon of 'screening the author' described by Cartmell and Whelehan in such films as  
42 *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). Noting that this device aligns with 'the renewed interest in the author  
43 and biography within English Studies', they observe that the focus on the author is another approach  
44 to affording a new text authenticity (8). Both approaches endeavour to suppose, invent, or envision  
45 how artworks come into being through an engagement with the life -- or more typically what is  
46 proffered as a key phase in the life -- of the author/maker.  
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3 A striving for authenticity is patently evident in the sustained passages of Chevalier's novels where  
4 there is a close attention to the skills, materials and traditions associated with authorial/artistic  
5 practice; that is, where the writer has undertaken relevant historical research. In *The Last Runaway*  
6 (2013), set in mid nineteenth century Ohio and featuring the Underground Railroad that enabled  
7 escaped slaves to travel north, her fascination with craft and associated communities of  
8 practitioners is so marked that, in the estimation of fellow historical novelist Carol Birch, what  
9 should be the book's central themes of slavery and resistance are 'unfortunately far less developed  
10 than the Quakers and quilting angle' (2013). Whilst this may be an example of an intersection of  
11 history and adaptation where the critical historical dimension is partly occluded, it is interesting to  
12 note how – in her rendering of artistic practice in times past – Chevalier sometimes appears to  
13 reflect metonymically upon striking a balance between transposing and inventing that invites  
14 readers to consider her own role as a historical novelist adapting the past. In *The Lady and the*  
15 *Unicorn*, for example, there is an exchange between two characters involved in the weaving of a  
16 tapestry from an original design; one asks "can we make such a big change?" and is told that  
17 "Weavers are allowed to design the plants and animals of the background – it's only the figures we  
18 can't change" (100).

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31 *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999), Chevalier's most well-known novel, takes Johannes Vermeer's  
32 seventeenth century painting of that name as a 'source', inventing the character of Griet as the  
33 model in the painting and adapting Chevalier's research on the historical setting of Delft into a story-  
34 world in which the relationship between Griet and Vermeer and the creation of the painting are the  
35 narrative fulcrum. As a mode of creative adaptation, it is abetted both by the enigmatic qualities of  
36 certain portraits where little or nothing is known of the sitter, and by instances where there is a  
37 paucity of information -- or there are at least suggestive lacunae -- in respect of the biography of the  
38 artist. Adapted in turn to film, the screen text (2003) affords the possibility of image-to-image  
39 quotation in which the historical source, Vermeer's painting, is re-constituted as a cinematic  
40 framing, the particulars of its nature and the reasons for its existence now imaginatively envisioned  
41 by the literary source, Chevalier's novel. Equally, original artworks may be understood as physically,  
42 textually, embodied in this and several of her other novels (that is, not just in the sense of prose  
43 conjuring ekphrastic effects through visual description) but in the more literal manner in which  
44 images are reproduced on the covers, jackets, and within. While Brian McFarlane notes that the  
45 movie is able to 'hint at film's ways of addressing and colluding with other art forms' (28) he does  
46 not discuss it in terms of its relationship with Chevalier's novel, nor – as is contended here – state  
47 that the relationship between novel and painting, as well as that between painting and film, is  
48 essentially adaptive.

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3 Whilst novel-to-film adaptation has not infrequently been figured as the business of substituting  
4 images for words, theorists have just as often pointed out that the two forms should not be  
5 understood in such starkly binary terms. Kamilla Elliott observes, for example, that the nineteenth  
6 century novel was 'brimful' of images and pictorial content, while films, including those from the  
7 silent era 'abound' in words (13). Understood in the context of the confluence of adaptation and  
8 history, this should incline us to consider a broader range of texts and artefacts as 'sources' – as per  
9 the example of Chevalier – that other texts may engage and draw upon to invoke and represent  
10 history. Judith Buchanan (2007) describes how early films that drew on the Bible for stories did not  
11 merely borrow story-as-words but were also engaged in the 'appropriation, quotation, and  
12 animation of recognizable imagery from the legacy of Western religious art' (50). That is, rather than  
13 'just' adapting a book, they were also adapting adaptations-upon-adaptations of, arguably, the most  
14 re-worked text of all time. Such multi-layered borrowings could be highly specific, such as the  
15 framings in *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) which are 'recognizable as visual quotations from  
16 known religious paintings, chiefly those of James Tissot' (53).

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27 The sense of visual art constituting a conduit to the past has also been invoked in critics' reception of  
28 historical literary texts. In his review of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, Christopher Benfey urges *New York*  
29 *Times* readers to 'Go to the Frick Collection in New York and compare Holbein's great portraits of  
30 Cromwell and More' (2009). Noting that the novelist has 'reversed the appeal of these towering  
31 rivals of the Tudor period', Benfey's overall assessment that Mantel's controversial rendering of  
32 Thomas Cromwell has painted him 'plausibly, brilliantly', is counterpointed against established  
33 historical interpretations of Henry VIII's fixer as an unsympathetic figure, 'official and merciless', as  
34 he appears in the Holbein portrait. At first the invocation of the portraits, and the extent to which  
35 the appearance of the subjects aligns broadly with conventional understandings of their essential  
36 characters, seems very like an asseveration of the power of an artwork -- imbued with the  
37 Benjaminian aura of a direct physical link to the sitter -- to bridge a great span of time and divulge an  
38 immanent truth. Yet his concluding remarks on Cromwell as 'mysterious' and praise for Mantel in  
39 filling in the blanks work rather to suggest the ultimate unknowability of historical subjects, and of  
40 the results of our efforts to do so being not a unified account, arrived at by discovery and the  
41 accretion of understanding, but a terrain of contesting voices and competing versions.

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53 A different case of an art/history/adaptation intersection would be *The Raft of the Medusa*. (1818-  
54 19) by painter Théodore Géricault. Inspired by the maritime disaster of 1816, the artist undertook  
55 extensive research into those events, including interviewing two of the survivors. In this respect, a  
56 parallel may be drawn with the preparatory work of Tolstoy for *War and Peace* in which he spoke  
57 with people who had lived through the invasion of 1812 decades earlier. Whilst Géricault's research  
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3 for his painting was into an event that was still essentially topical, both engaged in what  
4 contemporary scholars would describe as ethnography in pursuit of their medium-specific versions  
5 of verisimilitude. Géricault's completed work might also be characterised as proto-cinematic in at  
6 least a couple of ways. Its great size as a canvas (16 ft 1 in × 23 ft 6 in) offers an experiential  
7 analogue with cinema viewing, while the numbers who saw it (40,000 in London alone, when the  
8 work 'toured') are suggestive of its status as a blockbuster cultural event. *The Raft of the Medusa*  
9 has also inspired subsequent adaptations; it is the topic of a chapter in Julian Barnes' *A History of the*  
10 *World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), and central to *The Raft* (2006) by historical novelist Arabella Edge.  
11 The latter describes/surmises the process of Géricault's creation of the painting, with a particular  
12 emphasis on his tracking down and interaction with the two survivors whom he invites to his home,  
13 thereby making narrative grist of the ethnographic dimension of the painter's historical research.  
14 Sharing with several of Chevalier's works the central motif of imaginatively recreating how and why  
15 a prior artwork came to be, both books also borrow from that germinal artwork in the literal sense  
16 of utilising a visual reproduction: the Edge novel featuring a detail in the cover art, and the Barnes  
17 including a full-colour insert.

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29 Considered in terms familiar to adaptation studies, as indicated earlier, such works prompt us to re-  
30 evaluate what we take to be a 'source' and how that source is engaged or deployed in the adaptive  
31 relationship. While stories that centre on the creation of a particular artwork undoubtedly  
32 participate in the familiar process of co-opting some of the original's cultural value, in focusing on  
33 the phase prior to and during the creation of the original they are also in the business of generating  
34 or at least inflecting additional meanings for that source. Naturally the interpretations that readers  
35 and viewers bring to bear upon such 'origin stories' are significantly determined by our extra-textual  
36 knowledge; as Roger Ebert says of the speculative biopic *Becoming Jane* (2007), 'followers of Austen  
37 will know they are watching a fiction'. However the tone of the works is also key to the interpretive  
38 mind-set we bring. The tongue-in-cheek quality of *Shakespeare in Love* telegraphs to audiences that  
39 this was not really how *Romeo and Juliet* came into being, whereas the more serious tenor of *Girl*  
40 *with a Pearl Earring* (as novel and film) and the studied historical recreation of its setting are more  
41 likely to prompt some readers and viewers to view its imagined central relationship as not merely  
42 credible but maybe actual. In such instances the verifiable existence of the artwork or object, the  
43 purported outcome of the fictional or semi-fictional 'origin story', may operate to vouchsafe the  
44 *bona fides* of that narrative as somehow factual even though the author positions it as creative  
45 surmise or invention. Just as historical films which deviate from accepted or documented accounts  
46 may be criticised for promulgating a faulty version of history, as in case of *U-571* (2000), so stories  
47 that purport to describe artistic or authorial endeavour in respect of real works can be accused of  
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generating or feeding into a false version that may become the dominant interpretation or understanding; an adaptive 'fake news'. Whilst many page-to-screen adaptations, and especially the successful ones, facilitate a return to the source text with fresh insights, stories which ostensibly address the genesis of that source do something else. Not quite utilized as a model, nor – as in a radically critical interpretation such as *Man Friday* (1975) – as something to be assailed and systematically dismantled, the source is proffered as an Ouroboros: simultaneously prior to and a consequence of its associated story. This sense of circularity, of the story feeling both new and familiar, is compounded when such books and films fasten upon, emphasise, or invent correspondences between the artist/author's biography and the works for which they are celebrated, as for example the plot of *Becoming Jane* mapping significantly onto the events of *Pride and Prejudice*.

### Re-enacting the past

The construction by Géricault of a detailed model of the raft, informed by the testimony of his witness/survivors, as part of the process of creating his painting, points to another significant zone where the practices of adaptation and history meet: re-enactment. Historical films and television programmes are necessarily engaged in practices analogous to re-enactment: costuming performers in era-appropriate clothes; finding or creating historically-convincing spaces for pro-filmic events; casting on the basis of relevant competencies for participants, or the inculcation of those competencies (according to the demands of the narrative) in such varied arenas as authentic speech and accents, 'lost' trades or crafts, and skill-at-arms. Burgoyne describes 'the primacy of re-enactment in the historical film' as generated by exactly such 'a variety of techniques to produce a heightened sense of fidelity and verisimilitude, creating a powerfully immersive experience for the spectator' (8). Stephen Gapps, historian and coordinator of many large-scale re-enactments, argues that 're-enactors' self-reflective attention to historical accuracy in performance is a key element in the practice of re-enactment that can generate historical understanding' (2009). The knowledge and skills of re-enactors also means that they have often been used as extras in history films and television. Where battle scenes, for example, would call for significant numbers of participants with authentic costumes and weaponry, experience of era-appropriate drill, and a grasp of the potential health-and-safety perils of participating in such an event, groups of re-enactors are prime candidates and - one imagines - already inured as 'performers' to the lengthy periods of waiting around that attend moving-image productions. As Hadden notes, costuming in re-enactment activities covers a spectrum of historical authenticity ranging from those derisively characterised as 'Farbs' or 'polyester soldiers' (209) who expend little time or money in the pursuit of accuracy, to 'hard-core' re-enactors, derided in turn as 'stitch-counters' (224). Sarah Cardwell records how director James



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3 Ivory, describing the research-driven approach of his mostly BBC-trained crew for *The Europeans*  
4 (1979), a Henry James adaptation and early heritage film, alludes to an equivalent divide in the  
5 filmmaking practices of the time: [They] 'had taken almost an archaeological, or a scientifically  
6 detached approach to the film's overall design, which made it stand out at a time when most period  
7 films – particularly ones made in America – looked pretty sloppy' (79).  
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12 It is also notable that several of the fault-lines that divide opinion on historical films – and, for that  
13 matter, on adaptation – are replicated in respect of historical re-enactment. It may be dismissed as  
14 retrograde nostalgia, prone to a celebratory nationalism that foregrounds certain groups or voices,  
15 and obscures others (see, for example, Schäuble). Chapman observes that historical films are often  
16 centred on themes of 'national greatness' (7) while Hayward notes their specifically 'ideological  
17 function [...] serving up the country's national history' (205). The commemorative dimension of re-  
18 enactment may be understood as partisan, triumphalist, and provocative: analogous to marches of  
19 the Protestant Orange Order in Northern Ireland that (are calculated to) rangle Irish nationalists and  
20 Catholics. Screen adaptations that address contentious and divisive historical topics have the  
21 potential both to inform and to provoke profound feelings. Ranjani Mazumdar describes just such a  
22 process in an account of the furore surrounding the 1988 Hindi TV serial *Tamas*, adapted from  
23 Bhasham Sahani's novel of 1976. Reaching many more people than the original book, the series  
24 'rekindled the memory of Partition' (314) and 'emerged as a major public site of controversy and  
25 memory' (316). As with literature-on-screen and history-on-screen, a corollary of historical re-  
26 enactment existing at the junction of entertainment and *education* is that the accounts it offers are  
27 especially liable to interrogation in terms of their partiality and whose interests they serve.  
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40 Re-enactment and its near neighbour 'living history' (not focused on re-staging *particular* events)  
41 also illustrate perhaps the most fundamental kinship between adaptation and history-on-screen, the  
42 frequency with which the resulting texts are described as 'bringing to life' the materials they  
43 transform. This cliché has attended the promotional discourses of the moving image, and not  
44 infrequently the language used in reviews and criticism, since its earliest phases. Elliott observes that  
45 a 'rhetoric of incarnation, materialization and realization permeates adaptation criticism throughout  
46 the twentieth century' (161) and Landy likewise characterises the ambition of the historical film as  
47 the 'reanimation of the past' (1). The term 'living photographs' was widely used for cinema  
48 technology in the first years of its existence in the late nineteenth century (see Harding and Popple,  
49 3-10), and whilst the quality of movement became cinema's defining descriptor, the classical  
50 prefixes of two of the most important early film companies, Biograph and Vitagraph, retained this  
51 invocation of life. Filmmaker George Pearson recalled how, as a child, he heard a 'barker' for an early  
52 cinema show seeking to attract customers by contrasting the living properties of figures from the  
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3 kinematograph with their literary equivalents, calling "You've seen pictures of people in books, all  
4 frozen stiff... you've never seen pictures with people coming alive" (14). Whilst it was the living  
5 marvel of cinema being touted, it was a version of adaptation and page-to-screen transition that  
6 afforded the most potent comparator to convey the extent of this revolution in representation. The  
7 successive technological advances of film technology – sound, colour, CGI – have each been  
8 celebrated for their vivifying effects and, not coincidentally, have facilitated serial returns to  
9 previously exploited historical subject matter and literary source material that can be further  
10 'enlivened'. Formerly silent characters are afforded speech, living colour supplants shades of grey,  
11 and (in a case of story and showcased technology meshing particularly well) dinosaurs are conjured  
12 back to life by science. Of course, the unfortunate implication of such an understanding is that the  
13 literary antecedents are figured as somehow dead or inert, mere words. This may be why the  
14 original authors of adapted texts – often quizzed about their impressions, and rarely at liberty to be  
15 critical – are markedly less keen to deploy the language of 'bringing to life'. Rather, reflections on  
16 how a director has 're-imagined' a story, or an actor has 'interpreted' a role, frame adaptations as  
17 'versions' and 'readings', re-asserting the status of the original as a viable, self-sufficient, and living  
18 entity.  
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21 Even where the textual engagement does not involve adaptation, the tendency to understand our  
22 interaction with literary works, especially those of ages past, in terms of a life/death bridge is  
23 pronounced. Derrida's concept of 'hauntology' (1994) has been used to understand the recycling of  
24 culture, and in the opening sentence of *Shakespearean Negotiations* Stephen Greenblatt explains his  
25 fascination with the writer and with literature more generally as 'a desire to speak with the dead',  
26 which he characterises as 'a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies' (1). When, in 1876,  
27 archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered a gold funeral mask in a grave site at Mycenae and  
28 reputedly stated "I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon" he expressed himself, albeit with a  
29 decidedly theatrical flourish, in a related idiom. Although recent scholarship indicates that the mask  
30 comes from centuries earlier than the era associated with the Trojan War, the excitement which  
31 Schliemann's often-quoted words convey relate precisely to this chthonic link between living and  
32 dead, present and past, searcher and subject. The matter was, of course, doubly heightened by the  
33 fact that the physical artefact was a semblance of that most distinctive and communicative human  
34 attribute, a face, and by the artefact's seeming capacity to align Homer's epic *The Iliad* - typically  
35 regarded in terms of mythology and epic literature – more firmly with historical reality. This face, the  
36 discovery purported, brought myth to life. Whilst historical novels and films, biopics, authors-on-  
37 screen, and stories centred on the creation of other artworks, all seek to create a circuit between  
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3 source and subsequent work, a reanimating return, Schliemann's exclamation sought to re-  
4 instantiate the soundness of the source itself.  
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### 6 7 Famous faces 8

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10 In page-to-screen adaptation and historical films, one aspect of the bringing-to-life process has been  
11 the rendering of settings through location shooting, set construction, and creative practices that  
12 range from painting backdrops to conjuring entire worlds through digital effects. It is however in the  
13 act of casting and the portrayal of characters by identified actors, often 'stars', that the process  
14 achieves its fullest and most medium-specific expression. A common selling point of many  
15 adaptations and historical films is that audiences are proffered the experience of seeing a particular  
16 literary character or figure from history inhabited by a specific star. Few propositions in the movie  
17 industry are more familiar than the bald assertion that "*Actor X is Person Y*"; a proposition which  
18 audiences are generally happy to square with the knowledge that *X* has been various people before  
19 and will likely be others in the future. As Richard Dyer (1998) has examined, stars import meanings  
20 from their previous roles - and from what audiences believe they know about the performers - into  
21 their subsequent portrayals. Charlton Heston would be a notable example of a star whose  
22 propensity for being cast as historical figures, and to a lesser extent as fictional characters in  
23 historically-set dramas, meant that his features alone came to amount to an attestation of historical  
24 significance. A selection of relevant roles indicates how Heston served as the conduit for a  
25 remarkable spread of historical figures: Mark Antony (1950 & 1970), Andrew Jackson (1953 & 1958),  
26 Buffalo Bill (1953), explorer William Clark (1955), Moses (1956), Judah Ben-Hur (1959), El Cid (1961),  
27 John the Baptist (1965), Michelangelo (1965), General Charles Gordon (1966), Cardinal Richelieu  
28 (1973), and both Henry VIII (1977) and Thomas More (1988)!  
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42 The same historical figures and characters from literary sources have been portrayed on screen by  
43 multiple actors, in some cases for over a century, facilitating both popular critiques and comparisons  
44 as well as scholarly analyses of the different texts, performances, and intertextual relations that  
45 inhere across them. The network of re-iterations and inter-relationships that arise from junctures of  
46 character and actor will operate differently for different viewers according to the extent of their  
47 familiarity with other films and television programmes, and will not necessarily be at the forefront of  
48 their minds when immersed in any given story. (Though googling information about actors while a  
49 film or television programme is paused on a 'smart TV' is common.) However some sense of an  
50 actor's prior performances and of character portrayals by other actors will generally inform how we  
51 apprehend and interpret every *particular* screen portrayal of a protagonist from literature or figure  
52 from history. Naturally, an impression of the values and associations an actor bears (though itself  
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3 malleable<sup>6</sup>) has informed their casting in the first place. In turn, the evolving sum of all these  
4 portrayals is liable to influence our sense of the original literary characters or 'real' people. 1940 saw  
5 two film portrayals of Thomas Edison, for example; Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney inevitably  
6 bringing radically different attributes and meanings to the role. Conversely, Walter Huston imported  
7 similar qualities of statesman-like destiny to his screen appearances as Abraham Lincoln (1930) and  
8 Cecil Rhodes (1936). Errol Flynn (1933) and Clark Gable (1935) offered audiences a back-to-back  
9 opportunity to compare matinée idols playing Fletcher Christian, while Henry Fonda's performances  
10 as outlaw Frank James (1938) and lawman Wyatt Earp (1946) required viewers to perceive the actor  
11 in quite different ways but within the same genre codes. World War Two hero Audie Murphy played  
12 innumerable Western heroes and famously played himself reprising his military exploits in the 1955  
13 war film *To Hell and Back*, while the combined singing and acting abilities of Mario Lanza made him  
14 ideal to play Enrico Caruso (1951). Equally, a welter of factors – including the actor's familiar genre  
15 credentials and the difficulties that attend playing another 'race' - conspired against John Wayne's  
16 1956 portrayal of Genghis Khan. Bringings-to-life through individual performances are subject to  
17 critical and popular evaluations, both contemporary and subsequent, and as such may prove fleeting  
18 or enduring in the public consciousness. In either case, particular renderings of historical or literary  
19 figures are always liable to be supplanted by others.

### 20 21 22 Trumbo

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25 The 2015 historical biopic and adaptation *Trumbo* is illustrative of several of the factors discussed  
26 above as well as comprising a dizzying *mise en abyme* of representations and references that are  
27 particularly resonant for the analysis of adaptations and history. The film is based on a 1977 book by  
28 Bruce Cook: *Dalton Trumbo: A biography of the Oscar-winning screenwriter who broke the*  
29 *Hollywood Blacklist*. It charts the treatment of Trumbo and other Hollywood figures by the House  
30 Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the 1950s, his imprisonment for non-cooperation, and  
31 especially his period working secretly while blacklisted (both as the writer of original screenplays and  
32 as an adapter) either using a pseudonym or with the resulting work 'fronted' by a non-blacklisted  
33 friend. Belonging simultaneously to the long tradition of Hollywood films about the movie business  
34 and to the biopic genre, *Trumbo* is notable for the extent to which it seeks to annexe meanings and  
35 values from – even, arguably, to adapt - the successful 1960 epic film *Spartacus*. Adapted by Trumbo  
36 from the 1951 novel of the same name by Howard Fast (himself black-listed for his earlier  
37 Communist associations and refusal to name names to HUAC) *Spartacus* tells the story of a Thracian  
38 gladiator who led escaped slaves in an uprising against the Roman Republic. Itself 'adapted' from  
39 slender references to Spartacus by classical writers Plutarch, Florus, and Appian, the central theme  
40 of Fast's novel and the subsequent film is the valorisation of resistance to tyranny and oppression.  
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3 The deliberate parallel between the story of Spartacus and of the casualties of HUAC who refused to  
4 name names finds its most fulsome expression in the film's conclusion where the slaves refuse to  
5 accede to the demand of Crassus to identify their leader, preferring instead to all proclaim "I am  
6 Spartacus." Burgoyne observes that parallels between Rome and the USA have existed since 'the  
7 founding years of the nation-state', and that there is a 'long tradition of borrowing from the Roman  
8 past in order to crystallize aspects of American national identity' (15). This has encompassed both  
9 celebratory accounts of Roman virtues and achievements as well as cautionary narratives that point  
10 to the pitfalls of absolute power and decadence. For example, in *Shakespeare on Silent Film*  
11 Buchanan argues that Vitagraph's early screen adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1908) was  
12 especially 'topically resonant' for Americans, following the assassination of President McKinley in  
13 1901 (118). History films, like adaptations, may ostensibly address an anterior source but are often  
14 redolent of the preoccupations of the present in which they are made. Hilary Fraser observes a key  
15 aspect of modernity being the tendency of cultures 'to celebrate, make capital of, and appropriate  
16 the alien materials of their received past, rendering it an embodiment of present concerns' (109-10).

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27 *Trumbo*, in turn, references, borrows from, and even re-stages iconic fragments of *Spartacus* to  
28 direct viewers to a preferred interpretive framework for itself, and in respect of the phase of 1950s  
29 American history to which it refers. Besides the over-arching theme of fighting for freedom,  
30 *Spartacus* is also loaded with more specific positive associations. These include a parallel with the  
31 U.S. Civil Rights movement – while Rome is defined by slavery, the gladiator school and the freed  
32 slave army are racially integrated entities – and the endorsement of charismatic newly-elected  
33 President Kennedy, who crossed an anti-communist picket line to watch the film (a moment shown  
34 as newsreel footage in *Trumbo*). *Trumbo* also shares, after a fashion, the narrative trajectory of  
35 many historical epics in which the hero is subject to a fall or drastic setback early in the story,  
36 discovering his true cause and identity only after being reduced in status. While the early scenes of  
37 the film show Trumbo as eminent and wealthy, his refusal to bend to HUAC sees him significantly  
38 worse off; an outcast leading a band of untouchables. However - the film clearly suggests - it is this  
39 ordeal which leads him to do his most important work; a trope familiar from, for example, the many  
40 versions of the Robin Hood story and in particular from another important inter-text for *Spartacus*,  
41 the 1998 epic *Gladiator*. While *Roman Holiday* (1953), secretly co-written by Trumbo, is also  
42 incorporated in *Trumbo* in the form of original material screened as a film-within-a-film, *Spartacus*  
43 enjoys a greater and more sustained prominence, essentially because of the foundational analogy.  
44 Relatedly, although *Trumbo* also portrays the writer taking on the adaptation of Leon Uris' novel  
45 *Exodus* (1958) about the post-war creation of the state of Israel, including scenes with director Otto  
46 Preminger, played by Christian Berkel, it is predictably wary of seeking an alignment equivalent to  
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3 that which it strives for with *Spartacus*, despite the films sharing what Burgoyne terms the ‘theme of  
4 collective emergence’ (85).  
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7 The wish of actor/producer Kirk Douglas, played by Dean O’Gorman, for Trumbo to take on the  
8 adapting of *Spartacus* is established in exchanges between himself and the writer, played by Bryan  
9 Cranston. The homology between the two pictures then climaxes in a scene of the filming of  
10 *Spartacus* in which O’Gorman is costumed and coiffed identically to the most readily recognizable  
11 image of Douglas from the original film; in the gladiator outfit for his one-on-one combat with  
12 Draba, played by Woody Strode in the original. Inevitably, the ideological tenor and worldview of  
13 *Trumbo* contrasts markedly with certain pictures made *during* this period of U.S. and Hollywood  
14 history, and which, in turn, may be regarded as relevant historical artefacts. *I Was a Communist for*  
15 *the F.B.I.* (1951) represents the discovery of communists in heroic terms, and renders the  
16 communists themselves as unlikeable racists and agents of the Soviet Union. *On the Waterfront*  
17 (1954) deliberately invites interpretation in terms of the testimony director Elia Kazan had given to  
18 HUAC two years earlier, in which he named eight former communists. As David Thomson observes of  
19 the film’s self-exculpatory allegorical dimension, ‘the possible comparison between the Brando who  
20 informs on the mob and Kazan’s own readiness to talk is embarrassing’ (458).  
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### 34 Conclusions

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36 Just as adaptations and screen texts that address history share a ‘doubled’ nature, always at least  
37 partly defined by a relationship to an anterior work or works, so the two domains are connected by  
38 an overlapping set of terms and concepts. Equivalent critical and interpretive approaches --  
39 themselves originating in wider tectonic movements in the Humanities, such as the ‘postmodern  
40 turn’, returns to history and to a focus on the author, and revisionism -- serve to illuminate and  
41 problematize the issues concerned with transposing source material, and to help understand the  
42 balance between incorporating or respecting original material versus inventing and adapting to  
43 serve a new medium, time, or purpose. This article has demonstrated in terms especially relevant for  
44 adaptation studies how the historical film is an expansive category; its parameters contentious  
45 precisely because it derives material from such a broad range of genres and modes. Spanning stories  
46 derived from the historical novel, where the principal protagonists are often either invented  
47 characters or minor historical figures, through to narratives derived from drama and other forms  
48 where a key historical figure is also the central character of the narrative, historical films and  
49 television programmes are shown to address the past – and to frame the credibility of the  
50 representations they offer – in a great variety of ways. Following this, and in line with recent thinking  
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3 in the field, both historical novels and historical screen texts are defined here as adaptations, re-  
4 visiting history to create stories that – variously – follow, intersect with, and sometimes deviate from  
5 the past. They are adaptations not only in the sense - following Raw, Tutan, Leitch and Weiser – that  
6 history itself is fundamentally adaptive, but also in the way that the myriad structuring textual  
7 operations that transform sources to give them their new form are the same as those charted in the  
8 domain of page-to-screen analyses long understood as adaptation.  
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14 Particular attention has been paid here to how artworks and artefacts other than those typically  
15 understood as sources may be understood as giving rise to adaptations, often through creative  
16 surmise about the lives of artists and makers, in which the re-creation of a historical period is a  
17 common goal. In this context the work of historical novelist Tracy Chevalier and others has been  
18 examined in terms of what I have here described as the ‘origin story’. Re-purposing a term more  
19 usually encountered in respect of popular entertainment franchises, especially comic book stories, I  
20 propose the ‘origin story’ as a species of adaptation in which the circumstances leading to the  
21 creation of a real extant artwork form the story of a new fictional or semi-fictional narrative. Re-  
22 enactment has been examined as a common practice that links the fields of history and adaptation,  
23 and which bears an attendant set of ontological and philosophical debates. Finally, the article has  
24 posited and pursued the implications of another key mutual property of the page-to-screen  
25 adaptation and the historical screen or literary text: that both characters from literature and figures  
26 from history are understood as being ‘brought to life’ by their rendering on screen, animated  
27 through their portrayals by particular actors who carry their own evolving set of meanings from past  
28 roles and their personal biographies.  
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<sup>1</sup> We might also observe that the term 'sources' is further shared with journalism and police procedures. In both domains the connection to an anterior point of reference affords authority to the subsequent version, adducing originary material as evidence to counter any claim that the account offered is an invention.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Parrinder notes: 'The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that in English, unlike French or Spanish, the words 'history' and 'story' began to come apart in the late fourteenth century, at the time of the introduction of printing. A 'history' was, first and foremost, a factual record.' (2014. 93-94)

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Cardwell (2007) provides an illuminating account of the ways in which film and television adaptations can be *different*.

<sup>4</sup> *Quo Vadis* had been adapted earlier, in 1913 and 1924, as had *Ben Hur*, in 1907 and 1925.

<sup>5</sup> *The Lady and the Unicorn* has as its central characters a mix of individuals wholly invented by the author and others drawn from documented historical figures.

<sup>6</sup> Consider for example the fixity of the associations that Jason Statham brings to the action roles for which he is famous, compared to the chameleonic reinventions of Daniel Day-Lewis.