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# Questioning Borders in Adaptation and Illustration: *Where the Wild Things Are* and the Adaptation of Synchronically Illustrated Literature to Film<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

Using *Where the Wild Things Are* as a case study, this article aims to challenge prevailing paradigms within illustration and adaptation theory. Drawing on the concept of cooperation/competition, established definitions of illustration and the increasing trend of adapting picture books into films, I critically examine the limitations in the discourse within these fields, highlighting challenges in adequately addressing the objects they seek to explain. Through three key observations centered on synchronic illustration processes, subsequent adaptation networks, and Linda Hutcheon's notion of the source text as a "haunting" mechanism, I identify inherent shortcomings in the referred paradigms, ultimately suggesting the need for additional qualitative and quantitative research.

## Keywords:

Illustration, adaptation, theory

## Resumo:

Usando *Where the Wild Things Are* como estudo de caso, este artigo tem como objetivo desafiar paradigmas predominantes dentro da teoria da ilustração e adaptação. Baseando-me no conceito de cooperação/competição, em definições consolidadas de ilustração e na crescente tendência de adaptar livros ilustrados para o cinema, examino criticamente as limitações no discurso dentro destes campos, destacando desafios em abordar adequadamente os objetos que pretendem explicar. Através de três observações-chave centradas nos processos de ilustração sincrónica, nas redes subsequentes de adaptação e na noção de Linda Hutcheon

sobre o *source text* como um mecanismo “assombroso”, identifico deficiências inerentes nos paradigmas referidos, sugerindo a necessidade de investigação qualitativa e quantitativa adicional

**Palavras-chave:**

Ilustração, adaptação, teoria

Maurice Sendak’s beloved 1963 children’s book *Where the Wild Things Are* has emerged within academia as a profoundly thought-provoking literary work. From analyses employing a Freudian lens to interpretations exploring queer and postcolonial themes, as well as political examinations of cosmopolitanism,<sup>1</sup> the book has demonstrated its capacity to engage with diverse perspectives. However, despite occasional efforts to approach it from an intermedial standpoint, there has been limited consideration of its most renowned adaptation, the 2009 film of the same title, directed by Spike Jonze.

To underscore the noteworthy contributions of both the original literary work and its adaptation to illustration and adaptation studies, this paper examines their interrelation and situates them within the broader context of intermedial studies. The paper is structured into three segments, each aiming to challenge conceptual boundaries and approaches within illustration and adaptation. While I don’t assert that the referenced paradigms are inherently unsustainable, I argue that this particular case study can offer valuable insights into understanding their limitations.

**1. *The original work by Sendak questions the borders and limitations of most definitions of illustration, as well as most of the functions associated with illustration***

In the realm of intermedial studies, illustration is commonly perceived as an exclusively diachronic<sup>2</sup> process. Adaptation expert Kate Newell, in her seminal paper “Adaptation and illustration: a cross-disciplinary approach”, suggests that the study of illustration and adaptation involves intersecting processes or objects, noting that “neither adaptation nor illustration exist without the preexistence of something else” (2017a: 3). Similarly, children’s literature critic Perry Nodelman characterizes illustration as “an art that demands the prior existence of another art” (qtd. *ibid.*: 2). While this viewpoint is widely acknowledged, I assert that it warrants a more critical examination.

The original *Where the Wild Things Are*, authored and illustrated by Sendak, challenges this perspective on multiple fronts. The book has consistently been presented as a multimodal work, seamlessly integrating illustration and text. While it might be argued that such integration does not necessarily confirm a simultaneous production of text and illustrations, Sendak himself contradicts this notion, as it appears the book’s illustrations were (mostly) carried out concurrently with the writing process (Hentoff 1966). This creation dynamic which juxtaposes the process of working on text and illustration highlights a reciprocal influence

between the two, where each informs and shapes the other, therefore actively questioning the notion of illustration as necessarily diachronic.

In a similar fashion, the original book disobeys the two most often referred paradigms regarding image-text hierarchy and relationships: collaboration and competition. According to Newell, “collaboration is often framed as illustration’s conversation with or commentary on the prose” (2017b: 66), while those who think of illustration as competition see it either as something that can potentially drain the book of its “magic energy” (*idem*: 67) or actively engage in its criticism, challenging the prose’s information. In instances like this picture book, I contend that the illustration neither serves as commentary, transformation, clarification, nor competition, defying straightforward classification within these categories. While Newell (2017a: 8) highlights that “the act of juxtaposition creates flexibility in the image-prose relationship that expands the signifying value of both illustration and prose”, I argue that the relationship in Sendak’s book surpasses this notion. Instead, the image-text relationship actively steers the narrative, operating alongside the verbal text. Both semiotic systems are intertwined, introducing new narrative information not typically found in the counterpart system. They are interdependent and, as such, comprehending the prose necessitates reference to the illustration, and vice versa. This dynamic doesn’t merely expand the signifying value of each system; it generates entirely new significations that wouldn’t emerge from either, were they standing alone and unrelated.

While one might adopt a close reading stance by choosing to engage solely with textual information, claiming to have truly “read” the book becomes challenging in this context. The nearly interdependent relationship between prose and illustration in shaping the narrative makes it difficult to assert a comprehensive understanding of the text itself. To ignore illustration would be to ignore information that is constantly directly affecting the text, and as such, to some degree, is in itself textual. One might, for instance, feel justified in saying they have “read” an illustrated edition of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, even if illustrations are ignored. However, defending such a position becomes considerably more challenging when discussing objects which exist as hybrid from their inception, such as the one presented in this context.

Hybrid objects of this nature, paradoxically, often escape the attention of literary studies. However, those engaged in semiotics are keenly aware of their existence and significance.<sup>3</sup> The influence of picture book adaptations on contemporary culture is increasingly evident, with films like *The BFG* or *The Witches*, based on the works of Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake, serving as noteworthy examples which have permeated the cultural imaginary. In a 2018 text titled “Identifying, construing and bridging over media borders”, intermedial studies scholar Lars Elleström introduces the term “qualified media”, previously coined in his book, to characterize similar phenomena. According to him, “qualified media types [...] are normally construed on the ground of one or several basic media types”, referring to media types identifiable primarily by their modal appearances (2018: 23). Similarly, Schröter’s concept of “synthetic intermediality” – “a fusion of different media to super-media” (2011: 2) – or Rajewsky’s “medial combination” (2005: 51) may be applied in the accurate description of similar objects.

While these concepts are exemplary and useful in the description and categorization of the images in *Where the Wild Things Are*, they primarily address the intermedial aspects of the work in question, specifically the text-image relation, without providing a definitive framework for defining its pictorial element as illustration.

The conventional diachronic perspective and the paradigms previously discussed often lead to the oversight of illustration's (possibly) synchronic aspects, raising questions about whether the pictorial dimension of Sendak's book can be accurately labeled as illustration. Despite its presentation in what seems to be a similar manner, is it justifiable to maintain this distinction? Should we acknowledge the existence of synchronic processes within illustration, or is it necessary to establish a distinct definition for these images? Consequently, does illustration truly adhere to Newell's assertion that it is an art contingent upon the existence of another?

## 2. Spike Jonze's film adaptation questions the ways in which the source text "haunts" the adaptation

In her 2006 book *A Theory of Adaptation*, literary theorist Linda Hutcheon introduces the notion that the source text "haunts" the margins of the adaptation. This concept resonates widely among scholars in intermediality, including Kate Newell (2017a). It underscores the idea that consumers of adaptations unconsciously shape their viewing experience based on their interpretation of the source text and its lingering residual memory. Through comparisons between the two counterparts, viewers actively contribute to creation, alteration and attribution of significances to the adaptation (*idem*: 10).

It is crucial to emphasize that in discussions surrounding this perspective, the term "haunting" is often used without precise clarification, and there is a tendency to overlook distinctions between various types of "haunting" processes. Notably, the contributions rarely provide a detailed specification of the meaning of "haunting". One implicit condition, however, surfaces in a statement by Kate Newell: the haunting of the text occurs for "most viewers" based on the "memory [...] of the source text" (*ibidem*). In simpler terms, the adaptation is implicitly "haunted" by the source text only if there exists a "memory of the source" — if the viewer has encountered the media product preceding the adaptation (in this instance, Sendak's book) or has engaged with another medial configuration<sup>4</sup> within the adaptation network, serving as a foundation for the adaptation. I don't necessarily agree with this perspective because the ways in which texts "haunt" adaptations can exhibit significant variation. It may be worthwhile to draw distinctions between different types of reverberations from the source text that influence the significance attributed by the consumer to the adaptation.

While I believe that the intermedial scholarly community may recognize this possibility, I stress the importance of explicitly acknowledging a differentiation. Failing to do so carries the risk of oversimplifying all forms of reverberation between the source text and adaptation into a uniform and transversal process of signification. Though it is true that adaptation takes on different significances when establishing a connection with a memory of the source text, shaped by individual methodologies and personal perspectives (Venuti 2007: 33-34), it is

equally true that it assumes distinct meanings for individuals who have never encountered the original text but are aware of its existence. Reception, in this context, plays a pivotal role in determining how adaptation and source mutually influence each other. Even if articulating the inner workings of this reverberation is challenging, it is reasonable to assume that the process of constructing signification, when engaging with an adaptation without prior exposure to the source text, varies depending on whether the viewer is aware of its classification as an adaptation or not, for example. Even when the consumer is unaware that it is an adaptation (a scenario becoming increasingly unlikely given the common marketing of adaptations as such), they often still find themselves influenced by the original text.

In the case of Spike Jonze's adaptation of Sendak's picture book, this multiplicity of "hauntings" becomes increasingly apparent. Expanding on Newell's characterization of adaptation as a potential "amplificatory procedure engaged in addition, expansion" (2017c: 6), various elements in the titular film can be identified that do not solely derive from medial transpositions or intermedial references. Falvey notes that "Jonze's depiction of a young boy grappling with existential concerns stands as evidence that Jonze was not especially seeking a younger audience" (2019: 34), presenting a stark contrast to Sendak's child-inclusive and all-encompassing storytelling. It's crucial to highlight that, by positioning himself in this transformative manner, Jonze opens multiple hermeneutic doors, allowing his film to be viewed, connected to, and interpreted by a reader in ways that signify drastically different influences from the source text. On one hand, if the reader is acquainted with the original source text, primarily tailored for children, the film functions as its "maturation". Signification emerges from a continuous interweaving of the original book's themes with the now expanded, transformed, and revisited narrative of the adaptation. In this context, there is a discernible trace of what Newell terms "updating" (2017c: 6). However, we are not merely witnessing an "update" but rather encountering a complex web of meaning constructed from the coexistence of the original text with the adaptation. On the other hand, if the reader has had no prior contact with the source text while still being aware of its existence, the influence on the adaptation becomes somewhat blurred—the reader loses awareness of what might or might not have been transposed. Nevertheless, there remains a persistent awareness, to a certain degree, that the source text has exerted some form of influence on the ongoing media experience. Finally, if the reader or consumer of the adaptation is completely unaware of the existence of the source text, they are likely to assume that most narrative elements, visual aspects, and other constituent parts of the film were created to serve the overarching "more mature themes"—a significantly different perspective. However, even in this case, the reader remains "haunted", unknowingly, by the physical and stylistic characterization of the wild things. This representation in the adaptation unmistakably reflects an attempt to transpose formal, stylistic, and visual elements from the picture book's illustrations.

Considering all of these factors, there is merit in delving deeper into the mechanisms through which "hauntings" manifest in adaptations. Moreover, exploring how reception shapes the influence of a source text on the consumer's connection with a particular adaptation

could provide equally intriguing insights. Synchronically illustrated picture books, with their unique characteristics, stand out as a particularly noteworthy medium for conducting research in this area.

### ***3. Adaptations of works like Sendak's might choose to transpose elements from illustrations more often than adaptations of works that are diachronically illustrated***

Finally, it is also intriguing to contemplate medial transposition within the framework of what I have previously termed “synchronic illustration”, while recognizing the term’s inherent fragilities. The notion I propose is that adaptations, particularly film adaptations, may be more inclined to transpose visual elements from illustrations of the original work when dealing with synchronic illustrations as opposed to diachronic illustrations. While a quantitative study is essential for determining whether elements of synchronic illustration are more frequently transposed into adaptations than elements of diachronic illustration, there appears to be a discernible trend in this direction. This trend becomes evident when examining culturally significant filmic adaptations that strive to correspond, across media, with distinct visual elements from synchronic illustrations. Examples, such as adaptations of Dr. Seuss’ books, exhibit a clear attempt to replicate and transfer identifying visual elements of characters, styles, and more. This transposition occurs even when the characteristic being transferred exists solely in the original illustration and is never alluded to in the textual component. For instance, the signature striped, red hat worn by the cat in *Cat in the Hat* is not described in the text but serves as a massive signifier for how we perceive and identify the character. Similar observations can be made for works like *Polar Express* and several Roald Dahl adaptations, underscoring the need for further study on the specifics of what is being transposed and under what context.

If it holds true that the transposition of illustration elements to filmic adaptation occurs more frequently in synchronically illustrated works compared to diachronically illustrated ones, several reasons may explain this phenomenon. Firstly, in synchronic processes, where image and text are conceived as identifying parts of the original work, the interdependence of both elements makes it challenging to isolate them from each other. Additionally, a sense of “borrowed authenticity” in synchronic processes, often where the author serves as the illustrator, may validate the illustration as directly connected to the text, influencing how filmmakers react to its visual iconography in an adaptation context. Lastly, the connection between illustrations and text in synchronic processes might present a more mediagenic<sup>5</sup> opportunity for correspondence between media, particularly visual elements.

While this train of thought presents certain fragilities, it prompts important questions that warrant further research. Success stories in the context of diachronic illustration are undeniable, yet exploring the differences in this dichotomy is crucial. Whether the points mentioned above hold true and whether this apparent prioritization of synchronic illustrations in adaptation transposition processes can be substantiated by statistical evidence remain open questions for future investigation.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Ball 1997; Devan 2021; Kidd 2011; Singer 2011.

<sup>2</sup> “Diachronic” and “synchronic” are used after Elleström 2017: 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Batista 2008; Silva 2022; Wu 2014.

<sup>4</sup> “Medial configuration” is used after Rajewsky, 2005, and could be replaced by Ellestrom’s “media product” (2018: 17).

<sup>5</sup> “Mediagenic” is used after Marion 1997.

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