



Research Article

Travelling Memory, Staged and Screened: Adapting the Imaginary Child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Omolbanin Zaboli^{1*}, Fatemeh Pourjafari²

^{1,2}Department of English Language, Ke.C., Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

*Corresponding author: Zaboli.banin@gmail.com

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Abstract

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has been a fertile groundwork for academic criticisms, both as a literary text and a theatrical performance. Additionally, Mike Nichols' 1966 film adaptation of the play with the same title has also been recognized as its most outstanding reproduction into another medium. Critics have analyzed this adaptation by focusing on its aspects of fidelity, censorship, and Broadway conventions. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory and Astrid Erll's concept of travelling memory, the present study, however, intertwines the play and its adaptation as a unified process of memory transmission, specifically the imaginary child, as it sheds its temporality and turns timeless from an ideological and historically bound perspective. Turning into a memory that travels from stage to screen, the adapter recontextualizes the child into a mobile structure that transcends the stage's verbal instability resulting from sociopolitical ideologies of postwar American domesticity. The resulting adaptation employs cinematic aesthetics to unbound the child's historically situated narrative into a culturally mobile memory. Through this investigation, the present study's main argument centers on adaptation as a vehicle that enables literary memories to traverse across time, space, and mediums, thus undermining fidelity as the primary measuring value of an adapted work.

Keywords: Adaptation; Astrid Erll; Imaginary Child; Travelling Memory; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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1. Introduction

Premiered in 1962, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* shattered Broadway decorum as Edward Albee explicitly challenged idealisms that had dominated the postwar American society; characters' raw verbal violence and lack of emotional empathy are now understood as Albee's attempt to dismantle the commercial Broadway drama

that worked rigorously to intertwine success and its definitive factors with marital status. Dwight D. Eisenhower, as the nation's president, followed a rather peaceful doctrine, and consequently, American politics and popular culture followed suit to advertise domestic affairs. Against such a prevailing mainstream, *WAVW*¹ and its uncompromising portrayal of marital life garnered immediate attention, manifested through numerous and still ongoing stage productions; Mike Nicholas's adapted

¹ Abbreviated from the original title, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee

drama film, directed in 1966 and sharing the same title, is recognized as the play's major cinematic adaptation.

WAVW has sustained critical attention for decades, as diverse scholarly investigations approach Albee's play from different angles. According to Murray (2008), "[l]ong regarded as the bastard offspring of literary studies and film theory, adaptation studies has struggled to achieve academic respectability since its inception in the 1950s" (p. 4). While most critics have recognized the intersection between literary criticism and adaptation studies, few have done little more than to mention in particular the "Imaginary Child" in Albee's play as a form of fictional memory that travels from stage to screen, along with the reconfigurations required to represent this character anew and through medium-specific assets such as performance, camera direction, and audience's participation in this process. Leff (1981) has explored industrial adaptation and its relevancies, such as Hollywood norms, censorship of sexual explicitness, the adapter's fidelity level, and the impact of actors' performance on the overall quality of the movie adaptation; "[t]he studio's adaptation of playscript into filmscript should have been a straightforward enough task, and in point of fact the changes made from stage to screen were relatively few. Yet during the period in which the filmscript evolved, considerable thought and discussion were given to the screen treatment of the drama's action, setting, and language" (p. 453).

Contrary to previous studies that have treated adaptation as a negotiation between the Hollywood cinema industry and the Broadway realism context, the present paper approaches adaptation as a tool by which specific narrations travel between mediums; hence, by avoiding the discourse of mere fidelity and comparison, this argument aims to reframe adaptation as the action of memory transmission. Drawing on Astrid Erll's concept of travelling memory and Linda Hutcheon's proposed methodology on how an adaptation should be decoded, this study limits its scope to one narrative device – the imaginary child – not as a symbol, but as a memory object with its thematic structure translated to travel across media and historical contexts.

2. Theory of Adaptation and Memory in Culture

Hutcheon considers adaptation as a practice of two natures: a product or a process; a structure of changes and evaluations customized for other differing conditions. Despite its simplicity and broadness – perhaps a bit vague from a general standpoint – this definition sufficiently summarizes the central arguments of adaptation studies; to adapt a work, thus, is reshaping and representing it anew so it remains compatible with the progressive growth of the mind and milieu. Hutcheon (2006) has argued that "[n]either the product nor the process of

adaptation exists in a vacuum: they all have a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture" (p. XVI). She distributes the audience of an adapted work into two groups: the knowing audience and the unknowing audience; for an adaptation to be successful, it often operates by attributing considerable awareness to both groups, as each of them approach the adaptation with varying standpoints; thus, this difference of relational dynamic between the adapted and the receiver of the adapted shifts into a variable highly influential within the transferring process. Hutcheon (2006) has claimed that "[i]f we do not know that what we are experiencing actually is an adaptation or if we are not familiar with the particular work that it adapts, we simply experience the adaptation as we would any other work" (p. 120). On the other hand, "[t]o experience it as an adaptation, however, as we have seen, we need to recognize it as such and How? to know its adapted text, thus allowing the latter to oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing. In the process, we inevitably fill in any gaps in the adaptation with information from the adapted text" (p. 121).

The time, space, and context of an adaptation is fixed purposefully to address both groups; while the audience have particular impressions of a text, the source and its context turn into fragments of memories that are transferred and recontextualized in a new medium; any part of the source's narrative structure, thus, may function as a mobile memory of the whole work which travel across time and media under certain conditions. Erll (2011) has defined memory as a process not strictly individualistic, but rather a social and cultural construction; the emphasis should, therefore, shift to viewing memory as a process linked to mass consciousness. "[R]emembering' is a process, of which 'memories' are the result, and that 'memory' should be conceived of as an ability. Memory itself is, however, not observable. Only through the observation of concrete acts of remembering situated in specific sociocultural contexts can we hypothesize about memory's nature and functioning" (p. 8). Accordingly, she has deemed the processes of memory, remembering, and forgetting as corresponding items of the same caliber: "Versions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation. Individual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present" (p. 8).

Change is to be expected as visions of a past event travel across time, geographical spaces, media, and cultures; Erll refers to this as the 'traveling memory'. This concept, therefore, is comprehensible while regarding a primary source and its adaptation; but on how to approach this cultural mobility, Hutcheon (2006) has stated, "when

and where are the keywords for the exploration of what can happen when stories 'travel'. ... [C]hange is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories" (p. XVI). To trace WAVW's memory reconstruction in its adaptation, the 'when' and where' of this process should be investigated, this analysis focuses on changes in mediation and audience positioning while the imaginary child moves from stage to screen.

3. The Imaginary Child Performs

A nameless child with an unstable identity is introduced as George and Martha's son, sustained entirely through clashing dialogues and strict guidelines on who gets to 'recall' his existence, how he should be recalled, and where his recollection is appropriate. Transcending the conventions of a narrative invention, George and Martha's imaginary child is more of a carefully regulated memory structure that Albee constructs with fragments of cultural and historical contexts. Thus, this invented narration turns into a shared property prohibited for outsiders to recognize; contained within the four walls of the couple's marital house, it is a shared knowledge maintained with controlled circulation. The instability of this child's identity consistently refrains the audience, along with Nick and Honey, from confirming the validity of its existence up until the symbolic death of his narration at the end; in this regard, both the play's audience and the young couple unconsciously turn into participants of an imaginary exchange in which the playwright neither fully grants them confirmation nor denial.

The complexity of this couple's relationship, highlighted through their imaginary child, is situated within the framework of postwar America and its impacts on the society's attitude toward politically predefined epitomes of success: a merry domestic household, accompanied by particular marital ideals that certainly do not include sterility, failed masculinity, or a lack of high academic occupation.

Rather than representation, George and Martha's child operates as a product of shared remembrance, and up until his death, iconically, the audience does not possess the slightest knowledge of his appearance. Unbeknownst to all, this imaginary narrative functions as the sole axis maintaining George and Martha's fragile marriage, and further is eliminated by George upon Martha's violation of their preset rule: disclosure to a third party.

MARTHA (Great sadness and loss). You have no right... you have no right at all...

GEORGE (Tenderly). I have the right, Martha. We never spoke of it; that's all. I could kill him any time I wanted to.

MARTHA. But why? Why?

GEORGE. You broke our rule, baby. You mentioned him... you mentioned him to someone else (Albee, 1970, p. 136).

Marking the end of an illusion, ending the child's narration functions as George's attempt to regulate his and Martha's shared memory, which was progressively slipping out of his control; as the masculine agent, he reasserts authority over their shared narrative by ending its circulation. Hence, the imaginary child performs as a historical memory configuration, reflecting the 1960s American domestic life and the pressure posed on it by socio-political ideologies. "[M]any of these trends, such as rising divorce and decreasing fertility, had their inception well before 1960...[w]hat happened, beginning in the 1960s, is that they either suddenly accelerated..., or suddenly reversed direction, as in the case of fertility. The divorce rate had been going up for 100 years, for example, before it rose so precipitously in the sixties" (Popenoe, 1993, p. 529). In this regard, the imaginary child's performance is exclusive to an American society in a certain historical period; it cannot function symbolically in a universal sense. Because the imaginary child depends on context, historical specificity, and mediation, it becomes highly vulnerable upon the start of its recontextualization and shift from a stage narrative into a new medium.

While on stage, the imaginary child is implanted in a sort of ritualized narrative exchange between George and Martha, strictly under their surveillance by rules and secrecy. Yet, Nicholas's WAVW turns the imaginary child into an object of visual and emotional proximity. The historically situated anxiety of postwar marital crisis is re-mediated by the adapter to not merely reproduce the child: he turns into a memory that travels, while anchored historically, and thus acquires cultural mobility; not temporal, but turned timeless through medial translation. The child's image remains an invisible shadow in WAVW's adaptation, yet the cinematic platform it has entered into reshapes how this invisibility shall be presented, by actors and for the audience. Nicholas employs realist aesthetics of the audio-visual medium to decrease the distance that the imaginary child was in the possession of on stage, courtesy of George and Martha's increasing instability in its narration; the camera, repeatedly, urges the audience to watch Martha's grievance over a non-existent child's death while George stands over her wearing controlled cruelty as a façade. No longer clueless on comprehension like Nick and Honey, the adapter involves his audience in the process of how George and Martha perceive and remember their imaginary child.



Figures 1-2. Prolonged close-ups, facial expressions, and tight framing (01:50:25, 02:00:21)

The circulation of the imaginary child, thus, undergoes significant consequences upon this shift in mediation: the audience participates as a clueless spectator while the child performs instability on stage, the circulative exchange undoes; yet, the same audience turns into a witness, guided by the adapter's selectiveness on what should be remembered about this imaginary child, and how it should be represented. This further exemplifies Hutcheon's claim on the inevitability of transformation while travelling between mediums. Hutcheon (2006) has stated that "[a]daptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying" (p. 7). As the term implies the necessity of adjustment(s) to make something suitable, the adaptation process involves adjusting according to what the adapter deems to fit the receptor's social and cultural norms. Consequently, the query then shifts from the adapted *WAVW*'s rate of fidelity to a more complex context: does Nicholas and his audience remember their authentic ideologies and sociocultural values when encountered with Albee's imaginary child? Astrid Erll's framework assists in answering this question.

As the strict verbal exchange, which sustained the existence of the child, loses its authority and ideological form, this imaginative narrative gains a new function: a memory which travels from stage while maintaining affectiveness, as the adapter selectively reforms its ideological positioning; a cultural memory. Henceforward, the child's existential purpose is no longer bound to historical contexts, since he gains what Erll defines as 'cultural mobility'. Erll (2011) has claimed that

"literary memory narratives are not confined to the written medium. They can also manifest themselves in oral, visual, and digital media. Narrative is a transmedial phenomenon, and the stories of cultural memory therefore travel not only across time and space, but also 'across media', from novels to drama to movies to TV series and to the Internet" (p. 160). In this sense, the imaginary child can be approached as a travelling memory, a reconfiguration that gets adjusted with each recontextualization for a new adaptation of *WAVW*; according to her, "[v]ersions of the past change with every recall, in accordance with the changed present situation" (p. 8). This particular insight, therefore, clarifies why the adapted version of Albee's imaginary child remains compelling for whom Hutcheon refers to as the unknowing audience; the unassuming individuals who do not possess knowledge about the context of *WAVW* as a play, or its historical roots in Cold War anxieties for, specifically, an American society. Adaptation brings in novelty, as its process shifts toward "an act of appropriating and salvaging while trying to give new meaning to a text. Therefore, novelty gives adaptation its value" (Kinney, 2013, p. 8).

Nicholes shifts the child's function so as not to remain temporal and shackled to historical facts; this absent character's structure, thus, represents universal themes of emotional loss and illusion as a coping mechanism. The knowing audience, according to Hutcheon's terminology, carries memories of Albee's stage version, along with its theatrical aspects; hence, the imaginary child for this group is an unstable narrative, a verbal fiction. They remember him as a character never seen, secretive, under strict surveillance, and sustained only through dialogue. Nicholes' adapted version of *WAVW* triggers these memories by other means: actors' performances, camera works, and visual proximities urge the audience to feel, intertwining sensibility with intellectuality. Translating this memory structure into a new medium, the child's narration is no longer bound to a specific 'when?', as it successfully turns timeless by travelling across socio-cultural boundaries.

4. Conclusion

The present study investigated the imaginary child in *WAVW*, both as a theatrical narrative and an adaptation, a mobile memory that holds the possibility to become timeless outside the American context. The combination of Hutcheon and Erll's theoretical frameworks has demonstrated their compatibility, as it has allowed for approaching Albee's *WAVW* and its adaptation as a site-process of memory reconstruction while avoiding shallow investigations into mere fidelity assessment or narrative repetition. To survive travelling between mediums, cultures, and in order to turn temporality into

timelessness, the imaginary child undergoes a series of changes; it becomes mobile, maintains affectiveness and accessibility across contexts. As his memory successfully travels from stage to screen, adaptation, both as a process and a product, proves to be a suitable vehicle for cultural memory to circulate across time, space, and discourse. Tracing the child's migration from stage to cinema proved the necessity of alterations for a memory to successfully circulate and gain positive reception: the memory travels, but it does not remain stable. In this sense, WAVW exemplifies how adaptation assists in the production of cultural memory by prioritizing recontextualization over fidelity and preservation.

Authors' Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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