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"Self Adaptation" – Authors Turning Their Own Novels into Scripts – Case Study: John Irving and *The Cider House Rules*

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Abstract

"Self Adaptation", this research's subject, is an artistic process in which a screenplay is written, based on an existing source, by the source's original author. The screenplay is then produced into a film which is publicized as adaptation. The original author's involvement in the adaptation process summons, in my opinion, the question of **fidelity** - an issue occupying adaptation's practitioners and scholars for many years. Unlike previous usage of fidelity, resulting mostly in judgmental one-to-one comparisons between a textual source and its cinematic target, this work uses fidelity as an organizing concept in order to examine the adaptation process itself.

The case study around which this research is structured is the self adaptation to the popular novel *The Cider House Rules* (Irving, 1985), an epic tale about abortions and orphans, taking place in early 20th century New England. When John Irving agreed to take part in the adaptation, to write its screenplay and participate actively in its production, the ambition to stay faithful to his novel's scientific details, to its characters, its emotional effects and its political ideology – was his main motivation. He discusses this in *My Movie Business* (Irving, 1999), the memoir describing his adventures throughout the 14 years it took to complete the adaptation. But Irving himself came to realize that fidelity is untenable, especially in light of the question: To what can an author-turned-screenwriter remain faithful while adapting his own novel?

This research offers several possible answers to the incessantly resurfacing question of "fidelity to what?"; the answers progressing from the technical and stylistic aspects of the screenplay text; to the narrative and thematic levels of the adaptation; all the way to the public and personal contexts of the cinematic production. It starts by examining the

author's possible fidelity to his role as screenwriter, based on his compliance with the new medium and the technical and poetic standards of screenwriting. Then fidelity to the original medium is examined: first by comparing the narrative between the screenplay and the novelistic text, then by tracking the same narrative functions throughout their transition to the cinema. Furthermore, beyond-the-narrative components are examined - the screenplay's themes and ideology is compared with the film's and the original novel's. Then, considering the complicated issue of authorship, a self-adaptation authority and responsibility structure is suggested and examined in order to identify the author's "signature" in the cinematic adaptation. Finally, the question of self-fidelity is discussed – the author's fidelity to himself as artist and person.

Beyond focusing on an un-researched artistic practice (to the best of my knowledge), this research emphasizes the screenwriting phase which hardly received attention in adaptation studies thus far; and its screenwriter, here – a famous novelist; an author who pushed himself far from his familiar practice of prose writing into a new territory, composing a new text under different commercial and political constraints. This research offers a combination of new and existing methodologies, mostly from adaptation studies, screenwriting studies and cinema studies, in order to examine not only adaptation's final result but also its creative process.

The assumptions on which the research is based are that an author/screenwriter choosing to participate in self adaptation will be guided by fidelity ambitions and therefore attempt to act on several levels – textual, medium-wise, ideological, personal and public – to utilize his skills and talents to bring about an appropriate result to this collaborative work, meaning – to a cinematic adaptation of his novel, in which all constraints resulting from the different mediums, texts and artists working together – are balanced.

Among the research's findings, it highlights the uniqueness of the adaptive screenplay and further problematizes the question of fidelity, especially in the collaborative environment created around the original author's public and personal persona. The research also designates the personal process John Irving has gone through – his "Hero's Journey" and his own self adaptation. One can say this journey was completed successfully – the film enjoyed public and critical acclaim, and has awarded him the

Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar for 1999. But despite his claims regarding his fondness to his production team and their intentions to continue working together, no other Irving adaptation has materialized to date. This fact, together with further evidence including the motivation behind writing the memoir about the adaptation process, contribute to the conclusion that self adaptation is a unique cultural occurrence which deserves to be examined in such an interdisciplinary way.