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The final girl on the freeway: Adaptation and appropriation of a fairy tale

Abstract: Fairy tales and their adaptations transgress established social, cultural and temporal boundaries. This paper examines Matthew Bright's *Freeway* (1996), an adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood that deliberately mirrors this transgression by setting the film within the generic type of horror cinema. In choosing this mode, Bright partly restores the fairy tale to its original purpose, once existing as a folktale full of high melodrama, but goes further, criticising the text of 'known pattern' and overhauling it to a story in which an innocent female under attack restores her own equilibrium: in effect, deploying the 'final girl' trope that is common in slasher movies.

Freeway uses its adaptive status to radically reinterpret the source text, fomenting its oppositional assault through a genre most suited to subversion. Through textual analysis, the paper examines how Bright harnesses the potential of the cinematographic medium through a double interaction, one that not only allows a coded opening of the internal, intertextual space of the adaptation, but also an antagonistic encounter rooted in the context of horror cinema.

Keywords: adaptation, identification, intertextuality, spectatorship, transgression

*Tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes,
disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance
(‘sick-making’) of the tastes of others*

Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1986)

Nothing exists in a vacuum, motionless and inert. No work of art is monolithic, a uniform object to be observed from a distance. Rather each work is polysemic, a fluid, heterogeneous subject to be engaged with by any individual that encounters it. Each member of an audience brings their own taste and experience to the work, which in turn informs both, all the while different from any that a neighbour might have. But what happens when that work is an adaptation of *something* pre-existing?

For Robert Stam, “film adaptations...are caught up in [an] ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an

endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin” (Stam 2000, 66). The adaptive practice becomes infinitely manifold, active and kinetic, happening in a progressive continuum where creators shift material for audiences to shape. What is common among definitions of adaptation is the force of change and notions of perpetual reworking: there is little sense of any commodity being original as this motion has been happening for generations, a game of Chinese whispers begun in prehistory. The purpose of this article is to investigate the adaptive dynamic and how it can be applied to both creating and receiving an adapted work through a generic frame: that of horror cinema. It will attempt this through a close reading of Matthew Bright’s 1996 film *Freeway*, an adaptation of a (so-called) timeless story, that of Little Red Riding Hood.

I

To begin to think about adaptation, it would be useful to consider Roland Barthes’ distinction between a work and a text, the former something concrete and comprehensive with the latter being defined as a “stereophony of echoes, citations, and references” (Barthes 1977, 160). A work is something that suggests a sole author: a text is pluralistic. The arrangement of these citations and references within the body of the larger text has been called by Julia Kristeva an “intertextuality”, or a “permutation of texts” (Kristeva 1980, 60). Stam describes the process of adaptation as an exchange *across* texts, but for Kristeva each text already constitutes an (inter)textual dialogue running *through* its space. Julie Saunders believes that Kristeva saw “art, music, drama, dance, and literature in terms of a living mosaic, a dynamic intersection of textual surfaces” (Saunders 2006, 2). With this view, each text is an organism, its surfaces overlapping, elastic scales to contain an inner structure shaping itself regularly with each new breath administered by a fresh encounter, either from a receiver (reader/spectator) or another text ready to adapt it. However, adaptation is not just a self-sufficient exchange between texts or receptive participants, but a simultaneous (trans)action with surroundings.

Mireia Aragay defines adaptation as a “cultural practice” where “specific acts of adaptation need to be approached as acts of discourse partaking of a particular era’s cultural and aesthetic needs and pressures” (Aragay 2005, 19). Adaptations are a series of phrases shaped by and engaged with the historical-cultural circumstances that they have been uttered in, that will have different formulations than the source/s and the period in which it was last spoken. In the creation of an adaptation, context becomes as important as the formal text that the new version is attempting to build upon, in this case Little Red Riding Hood.

Everybody knows the story of Little Red Riding Hood. André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion suggest that this *fabula* is so universal that it may exist in a “virgin” state, one that is independent of media and context and fixed as absolute (Gaudreault and Marion 2004, 63). However, we all know this story through an individual telling of it, orally from a parent or schoolteacher, or having read it in a collection of fairy tales. Somebody else has espoused this story and mediated it to us at a point in our lives, just as it had been communicated to them, more often than not a derivative of either the version recorded by the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault. Vladimir Propp, who has written extensively on the construction of fairy stories, believes that “a work of folklore exists in constant flux, and it cannot be studied in depth if it is recorded only once. It should be recorded as many times as possible. We call each recording a variant” (Propp 1984, 381).

Folklore is stories for the general masses, belonging to nobody yet possessed by everybody. Each different variant has particular features to it reflecting the personality of the teller and adapted to suit the listener. A variant told by a parent to their four year-old child will be different to the one recited to a classroom of teenagers. The seemingly uncompromising and punitive morality of Charles Perrault’s variant, where Little Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf, was altered significantly by the Brothers Grimm, who allowed a woodcutter to leap in, eviscerate the wolf and thereby rescue the girl that strayed into the licentious unknown, the saviour facilitating rebirth a father figure.¹ As Jack Zipes points out in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, the German writers altered the narrative purpose so it was correspondent with a theme of socialisation for young girls:

“Essentially, the Grimm Brothers contributed to the literary ‘bourgeoisification’ of oral tales which had belonged to the peasantry and lower classes and had been formed by the interests and aspirations of these groups...Wherever possible, they sought to link the beliefs and behaviour of characters in the folk tales to the cultivation of bourgeois norms” (Zipes 1991, 47).

It is the accessibility of content, readily understood whilst reaffirming social mores, and the ease in which it can be communicated that attracts people to frequently re-engage with folklore. Bruno Bettelheim, in his seminal study of fairy tales *The Uses of Enchantment*, is careful to point out the difference between a myth and a fairy story: “The dominant feeling a myth conveys is: this is absolutely unique [...] The reason is not so much that what takes place is miraculous, but

¹ Both of these tales, translated by Maria Tatar, can be found in Tatar 1999, 11-13 (Perrault), 13-16 (Grimm). The Brothers Grimm tale terms Little Red Riding Hood as ‘Rotkäppchen [Little Red Cap].’ For the original texts that Tatar used, see Perrault, ‘Le Petit Chaperon Rouge’, in *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé. Avec des Moralités* (Paris: Barbin, 1697), and Grimm, ‘Rotkäppchen’, in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 7th ed. (1812, Berlin: Dietrich, 1857). Notice how Perrault adds ‘With Morals’ to his title.

that it is described as such. By contrast, [...] even the most remarkable encounters are related in casual, everyday ways in fairy tales” (Bettelheim 1991, 37).

Cinema and television would appear to be natural media to adapt a fairy tale as they are so integral to how a general audience encounters storytelling. Both are communicational media for a mass audience, an ideal platform to transform content (perhaps extraordinary) to the ordered sphere of the everyday (folkloric). As film theorist Robin Wood has described, movies are “at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audience – the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology” (Wood 1978, 25–32, 26). The move from telling to showing also makes the story more culturally present, Linda Hutcheon theorising this shift as “from the realm of imagination to the realm of direct perception – with its mix of both detail and broad focus” (Hutcheon 2006, 23).

II

The opening credits of *Freeway* make the audience highly aware of its status as an adaptation. A colourful whirl begins a montage of illustrated images of girls (many wearing red) encountering a brown wolf, large graphic cells as if lifted from a comic book. The camera animates the frame, beginning tight on one element and then pulling back to reveal the static content of the painted image, giving motion to its storybook pictures. Whilst the two-dimensional figures are broadly recognisable, the details are unsettling. A close-up of white knickers peeping out from a short, vermilion dress jumps back to reveal the Big Bad Wolf, tongue lolling, reaching to grasp what is on display. This Little Red Riding Hood is older, more developed, and the wolf a sexual predator, thick tail erect with excitement. Large, anxious face of a girl moves to the Big Bad Wolf’s bulging eyes and then whips to her crotch. The close-ups of the girl place the audience in a voyeuristic position: as the wolf comes into view, we recognise that what we have been focusing in on is his ‘meal’, remaining complicit as his gaze hunts further (and lower). We are so allied with the wolf’s point of view that when a frame begins with a hand atop a furred protuberance, we are invited to conjecture that this may be the wolf’s phallus. Pull back to reveal hairy arm. We are fulfilling the wolf’s wishes on his behalf. The sequence ends with another colourful whirl. This variant of Little Red Riding Hood is being recycled into something else, spun into new proportions.

For Hutcheon, adaptation is an “announced and extensive transposition of another work” involving a mediatic or generic shift or “a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view” (Hutcheon 2006, 7). The opening segment of *Freeway* encompasses all of these ‘trans-

positions': media (written/oral language to illustrated/animated visual); genre (children's tale to adult fantasy); frame (Little Red Riding Hood to Big Bad Wolf). The result is a "transcoding" combined to produce a "manifestly different interpretation" of a tale that we recognise, or thought we did (Ibid).

The first filmed scene (i.e. cinematographic) takes place in school. 'The cat drinks milk' looms large on a blackboard before the camera pans across a classroom peopled with disinterested children (one snoozes on a couch), finally settling on a teenage girl struggling to read this simple sentence. She looks like she might be approaching eighteen. This introduces the girl, Vanessa Lutz (Reese Witherspoon), as a young adult with a pre-school level of literacy, but it also presents the written word as a stumbling block, something problematic. The fairy tale canonised by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm in literary form is being further dispensed with, for this version of the story will be communicated through audio-visual means – the teacher prompts Vanessa by making a "Miaow" sound and signals encouragement through gesture. From the beginning, *Freeway* (re-)positions itself as a retelling not a rewriting of a fairy tale, indicative of Propp's belief that "in its origin folklore should be likened not to literature but to language...which has neither author nor authors" (Propp 1984, 379). For Saunders, fairy tales and folklore "serve as cultural treasuries" because "their stories and characters seem to transgress established social, cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries" (Saunders 2006, 82–83). Fairy tales are not only transgressive in their form, allowing for multiple variation and interpretation, but also in content. Where else would children encounter tales of cannibalism, murder and child abuse? Bright deliberately mirrors this by setting his film within the generic type of horror cinema: his tale is a challenge to mainstream taste, filled with coarse theatrics, sexual violence and surreal bloodletting, all tempered with indelicate humour. On the surface, this is not particularly novel. In her seminal book *Men, Women And Chain Saws: Gender In The Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover asks us to consider the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, who "strikes off into the wilderness only to be captured and eaten by a wolf (whom she foolishly trusts), though she is finally saved by a passing woodsman. Multiply and humanise the wolf, read 'rape' for 'eat', skip the woodsman (let Red save herself), and you have *I Spit on Your Grave*" (Clover 1992, 124). *Freeway* certainly has elements of rape-revenge, but will also crucially use a motif from the slasher film as a liberating frame of reference.

Like the fairy tale, horror cinema exploits reality to an extreme, offering something disturbingly parabolic. Clover further aligns the genre to the mode of folklore:

"Although many folklorists disown horror movies as products too mediated by technology, authorial intention, and the profit motive to be seen as folklore in

any authentic sense, the fact is that horror movies look like nothing so much as folktales – a set of fixed tale types that generate an endless stream of what are in effect variants: sequels, remakes and rip-offs” (Clover 1992, 10).

In choosing this form, Bright also restores Little Red Riding Hood to its origin as “a folktale full of earthy humour and high melodrama... [before being] transformed into a heavy-handed narrative with a pedagogical agenda designed by adults.”² As Zipes has noted, “Derived from the German version, *Rotkäppchen* (Grimm No. 26), American versions of the tale have been sanitised to the point where the erotic elements disappear and the tragic ending becomes comic. This approach emasculates a powerful story; one which unrevised is a metaphor for the maturing process” (Zipes 1991, 52). In updating the content of Little Red Riding Hood to a dangerous, modern-day America, the filmmaker is also back-dating the generic form to the earlier mode of expression using a particular modern-day cinematic frame. Is *Freeway* a sequel or prequel to its source?

The adaptation becomes a dynamic two-way intertextuality, using the contemporary to; in this case literally, revive the ancient narrative whilst at the same time distancing itself through a modernisation of setting. It is a process that the scholar George Kubler believes essential to lived experience: “Human desires in every present instance are torn between the replica and the invention, between the desire to return to the known pattern, and the desire to escape it by a new variation” (Kubler 1962, 72 cit. in Hutcheon 2006, 173).³

Kubler is correct to identify this as a desire, a human need to experience both difference and similarity. As we are constantly evolving as individuals, in our ever developing environments (those shaping external factors) and maturing selves (our inherent properties), it is instructive to witness this adaptive change occurring in art. Hutcheon talks about the “pleasure” of adaptation that could further describe these desires, “The comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change” (Hutcheon 2006, 4). It is this

² “Introduction to Little Red Riding Hood” in Tatar 1999, 6-7. She cites as an example “The Story of Grandmother”, recorded in 1885 but almost certainly told as a peasant folk story before the Middle Ages. In this version, talking cats call girls “sluts”, Little Red Riding Hood performs a strip-tease for the wolf before getting in bed with him and then fools him by going outside to defecate - “are you making cables?” is the vulgar innuendo he uses. The tale (trans. Tatar) can be found in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, 10-1. For the original text used, Tatar states that it was told by Louis and François Briffault in Nièvre, 1885. Originally published by Paul Delarue, in “Les Contes merveilleux de Perrault et la tradition populaire”, *Bulletin Folklorique de l’Île-de-France* 1951, 221-2.

³ Like Stam and Barthes, notice Kubler’s resistance to the term “original” preferring “replica” instead. All adaptations of this are free-form “inventions”, created so as not to “replicate” (i.e. translate faithfully) the source.

tension between pleasure and risk that enhances our encounter with adaptation and allows us to use the new text as a means to enrich the “known pattern”.

III

Following the sequence in the classroom, Vanessa is next seen riding on the handlebars of a bicycle with a bright red jacket. She is the Little Red Riding Hood of the tale and, briefly, we are in the familiar territory of the fairy story: young girl embarking on a journey. Despite the fact that she is not on foot and being transported by her boyfriend, the broad essence is recognisable if the detail is altered. On the arrival at her home, however, the audience is confronted with a completely distorted setting from the happy family life that we believe Little Red Riding Hood led in the fairy tale universe. Her mother Ramona (cult-favourite Amanda Plummer) is introduced turning tricks on a street corner, sporting a skimpy, plastic, crimson top. Inside their motel room, Larry is a tattooed, beer-swilling, drug-addicted monster who wants to have dominance over his adopted daughter. “I’m getting ready to take a big shit right on that pointy little head of yours,” he threatens: it is an amplified rendering of the wicked step-parent that desires to destroy their youthful charge, in this case by means of extreme scatological degradation. He will not be the first surrogate father to want to do this, nor the last.

Whilst Vanessa watches a cartoon on television (of Looney Tunes’ *Little Red Walking Hood*, adding to the mosaic), Larry makes a sexual advance on her. If one expected her to be as passive and innocent as the fairy tale figure, another surprise awaits. Vanessa turns on Larry and beats him to screaming submission, issuing him with the admonition, “Now you just behave!” Just as she can discipline when her stepfather gets too boisterous, so she can placate her mother when she is in trouble: with Ramona arrested for soliciting and handcuffed in their motel room, Vanessa holds a cigarette for her, administering it as though it were a baby’s bottle. The ‘idealised’ family dynamic of the known fairy tale is here reversed through what Saunders has termed a “mechanism of defamiliarisation, inviting us as readers or spectators to look anew at a canonical text that we might otherwise have felt we had ‘understood’ or interpreted to our own satisfaction” (Saunders 2006, 99).

This process forces us to think *back* to the fairy tale and to re-interpret the “known pattern.” The written text of the Brothers Grimm variant states that “it was the grandmother that loved her most of all” and any version of the tale begs a question: Why did the mother let her daughter venture into dangerous territory alone in the first place? (cit. in Tartar 1999, 13). Perhaps the household of Little Red Riding Hood was lacking in love: with the exception of the final-hour

woodcutter, there is a distinct absence of a father figure in almost all variants. Perhaps Little Red Riding Hood necessarily became the supportive backbone of the family because her mother was unable to, for whatever reason. *Freeway* directly calls into question the stability of the Hood family unit. As Vanessa embarks on her mission to join grandmother as an alternative to foster care, the journey of the red-bonneted girl into the unknown can be seen as an escape to find a new, more sympathetic home. [Indeed, a chintzy vision the girl has of granny imagines her dressed as an angel surrounded by plastic animals and pink flamingos, her trailer a Noah's Ark as captained by John Waters, underlining the sense of offbeat dysfunction.]

Before embarking on her road trip, Vanessa stops to see her boyfriend, Chopper Wood. There is no doubt whom he signifies. Unable to accompany her, he gives his squeeze an automatic for protection and waves goodbye, his hazy figure seen in the Cinemascope frame of Vanessa's rear-view mirror, dwindling in significance. Shortly after she drives away, Chopper is gunned down in a drive-by, having left himself unarmed. It is here that the audience knows the ending of this tale will be revised, for the traditional saviour has been neutralised. Vanessa is alone on her journey, the character of Little Red Riding Hood now imbued with the potential to decide her own fate and not be dependent on a male to come and rescue her.

The path she has to travel along is one carved through the wild countryside of America, the Freeway. Like the woods of the fairy tale, the interstate is a large public expanse populated with unknown space, full of uncertainty and danger. In almost all variants of the tale, Little Red Riding Hood either strays off the path or chooses a less arduous route at an intersection. Both are presented as deliberate choices the girl makes, one defying her mother's instruction, the other made out of laziness. This implicitly positions the Big Bad Wolf as a figure of punishment, a moral warning against ill-judged decision.

Vanessa is stranded by an event out of her control: upon turning onto the carriageway, her car breaks down. Bent over the bonnet to investigate, a station wagon pulls over in front. We witness a point of view shot through the vehicle's wing mirror, slowly zooming in toward the girl's protruding posterior. It is the movement used to explore the graphic frames in the opening credit sequence and casts no doubt who is in the driver's seat. Unlike the figure in the fairy tale, Vanessa's encounter with the Big Bad Wolf is not her own fault. This change in motivation could be an example of what the poet Adrienne Rich might term a "re-visioning":

"The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. [...] We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (Rich 1992, 369).

Freeway criticises the text of “known pattern”, moralistic fable where a wrongdoing girl gets punished and needs to be saved by her gendered opposite, and re-visions it as a story in which an innocent female gets attacked by a male and must restore her own equilibrium. Bright’s adaptation, then, becomes energised with a more political desire to usurp the accepted patriarchal frame in which the original tale was told and replace it with a more tolerant narrative.

The Big Bad Wolf is recast as Bob Wolverton (Kiefer Sutherland), a well-dressed, well-off professional. He is a psychological counsellor in a “school for boys with emotional trouble.” But no amount of fine woollen clothing can disguise the true nature of this figure. As he coaxes Vanessa to take a ride in his car, he waves to her through the windshield, the camera ostensibly aligned with her point of view. It is less a friendly gesture but a direct signal to the audience that he has arrived, furthering our complicity begun in the animated credits.

Bettelheim disapproves of illustrated manifestations of the monster because they are “so much more complete as compared to our own vague and shifting image, rob[bing] us of...meaning” (Bettelheim 1991, 60). Whilst the term ‘Big Bad Wolf’ can invoke a particular creature, unique in the imagination of the reader/listener and as terrifying as that individual needs him to be, in giving the idea of the Big Bad Wolf a directly perceived form, meaning is far from robbed. This manifestation is unsettlingly loaded because he not only inhabits the world of the spectator but holds a position of professional authority within it, someone who has private access to children throughout his everyday life. Endorsed by state and society, his *métier* is to earn the trust of vulnerable youngsters. This Big Bad Wolf is far more threatening because he is so recognisable, both as a figure that exists in the real world, and in the danger he represents through not only the folkloric memory of the story, but within the frame of horror cinema: roadside appearances by charming Samaritans never bode well.

IV

The centrepiece of *Freeway* is Wolverton’s prolonged seduction of Vanessa, initially outside a roadside diner and then in his car. The exchange that occurs first is predominantly shot in long take, tracking the two of them walking parallel to the main road at night. The sequence is uncomfortable, partly because of what Vanessa is describing, a troubled upbringing in foster care of sexual abuse and violence, but also because of the unhurried length of the unbroken camera move. The single take draws us into Wolverton’s space as he steers the conversation, permitting us ourselves to fall prey to his methods of confidence trickery. Because the scene is allowed to play out without any technical interference (edits, music), we temporarily forget that this is an adaptation and are sucked into its apparent reality.

As Wolverton's line of questioning becomes more insidious ("Did your stepfather ever molest you?") the image subtly cuts to a reverse angle, the camera slowly pushing in on the two of them as Wolverton gradually moves closer to her, reaching out in comfort. The scene ends on a tight medium shot of the pair, the closest we have been to them since they exited the diner, Wolverton standing right against her shoulder. "You're going to have to let me in," he says, a weighted comment that reframes our involvement with the scene, itself a reference to the Three Little Pigs, bringing us sharply back to the text as adaptation and the predatory threat of Wolverton.

It is accepted in film criticism that there are two types of identification: primary (with the camera) and secondary (with the character). Clover elaborates that

"both are fluid, character-identification on the psychoanalytic grounds that competing figures resonate with competing parts of the viewer's psyche (masochistic victim and sadistic monster, for example), and camera-identification on the cinematic grounds that the camera can entertain different positions with ease – not just character positions but omniscient ones – and with different degrees of personality" (Clover 1992, 8).

Here, the audience have been double-bluffed, the quiet pace and unobtrusive editing allowing our empathy to align with Vanessa, all the while unaware of our gradual implication within the scene, the camera fully identified with Wolverton's psyche, insinuating itself into the girl's ingenuousness by slowly closing down the space between them. Gaudreault and Marion have defined the "potential of a medium" as "deriving from a double interaction: not only of the interaction that allows a coded opening of an internal space where different materials of expression can be combined, but also the interaction that is produced by the encounter" (Gaudreault and Marion 2004, 66). We have listened with compassion to Vanessa as Witherspoon earnestly recounts her character's woes, but our overarching interaction with the sequence has been to collude with the Big Bad Wolf in our unwitting encounter with 'his' camera-identification strategy. Content and medium have become inextricably linked.

The same is true when the action moves into the enclosed space of Wolverton's vehicle, although here a much more distinct editing strategy is employed. Wolverton continues with his line of questioning, each probing enquiry and its resultant answer initially filmed in a medium-close/reverse shot manner. As Vanessa's responses become more sexually graphic, the arrangement changes to favour Wolverton's reactions to Vanessa's descriptions: even when he is foregrounded and she in focus, the camera is positioned so his growing arousal is pulling our attention from her confessions. When Vanessa explains that the oral sexual abuse her stepfather administered to her "felt like he was going to the bathroom in my mouth", his face lights up.

The Big Bad Wolf goes in for the kill.

“WOLVERTON: Vanessa, do I have your absolute trust?

VANESSA: I think I trust you more than I ever trusted anyone in my whole life Bob.”

As Vanessa delivers her reply, Wolverton grins broadly, an accompanying percussive twist on the soundtrack inviting us to read it as wolfish. From here on, the camera films Bob in tight close-up, drawing us right in to him as he has done Vanessa, his body language directed more at the lens, perhaps performing for us, showing off his relish in listening to Vanessa’s horrific stories of sexual debasement. Our interactive proximity to Wolverton is highly unnerving.

Once Wolverton ‘exposes’ himself, unable to contain his psychosexual urges any longer, he becomes a raging figure of punishment, furiously spitting, “I’ve absolutely reached my limits with people like you Vanessa... garbage people... You’re already a master manipulator of men.” As discussed before, the Big Bad Wolf is implicitly authored as a symbolic representation of moral retribution, but the figure as explicitly recounted is a villainous trickster with a base appetite for young girls. Here, Wolverton betrays himself as both, the wolf of the fiction and the monster of the creator, a big bad Grimm Perrault, aiming to teach wayward girls a physical and principled lesson. At the same time, this also aligns Wolverton with those who believe Little Red Riding Hood to be a seducer figure deserving of punishment, serving to comment both on the cultural meaning of the wolf and the critical interpretation surrounding him.⁴

José Ángel García Landa has defined intertextuality as the “relationship between a cultural product (e.g. a play) and its screen adaptation(s)... analysed as a performative intervention or as an existing discourse formation which includes both the original product or text and the discourses using it, originating it, deriving from it or surrounding it” (Landa, cit. in Aragay 2005, 181). If Bright is also critiquing the way the story has been steered toward a certain interpretation through the commentaries existing around the text, his Vanessa gives voice to the figure of Little Red Riding Hood and acts as a plea for reconsideration of the character.

“WOLVERTON: After he [stepfather] ejaculated in your mouth, did you feel you were being transformed into some kind of human urinal?

VANESSA: I knew I was flesh and blood.”

Sickened and tired at the abuse she has received at the hands of adults who want to control her through (oral) sex, mirroring the way control of children through orality emerges in other fairy tales, most notably Hansel and Gretel,

⁴ Bettelheim, for example, talks about “the little girl’s propensity for seducing her father, and...her desire to be seduced by him also” (Bettelheim 1991, 176).

Vanessa (re-)asserts her position as a real individual, stating again, “Mister, I’m a person. I’m a human being.”⁵ Vanessa desires to be treated as an independent *somebody* with actual feelings: this Little Red Riding Hood no longer wants to be viewed as a passive, typical *anybody* that can be used and dominated through retellings inflected with bourgeois morality. Perhaps *Freeway* is clamouring for a re-fashioning of a type of cultural identity. As Carolyn Heilbrun has commented, “We live our lives through texts...out of old tales, we must make new lives” (Heilbrun 1990, 109).

Through the gift of Chopper’s weapon, Vanessa is able to do what the traditional Little Red Riding Hood was unable and turn the tables on the Big Bad Wolf.⁶ Once she has Wolverton at gunpoint, the camera films them in a single take through the windshield of the car as Vanessa tries to manage the situation and destroy the power that the Big Bad Wolf, and the forces he represents, have over her. The filming technique so far has allowed the audience to be manipulated by Wolverton’s management of the situation, Vanessa having been powerless over the cinematic form, just as the character of Little Red Riding Hood is entombed in the ascendant texts of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault. Here, there is no camera strategy or editing technique: we can only observe her struggling to overpower her adversary.

Gradually, Vanessa grows in confidence and chides Wolverton: “You had your turn to talk. I think it’s only fair that I get my two cents in.” The marginalised voice of Little Red Riding Hood, often reduced to naïve questions about big eyes and teeth, raises itself to pronounce her own judgement. The Big Bad Wolverton is “a criminal first and a sick guy second”: adhering to the standards that she has been judged by for straying off the path, the moral verdict (willfully wrong) takes precedence over the psychological one (impulsive action). As she makes this decree, the camera changes position in a swift movement to confront Wolverton, the lighting also shifting to brighten Vanessa’s face. Little Red Riding Hood has briefly (re)gained command of her medium and ostensibly destroys Wolverton, along with the control that has kept her docile, by shooting

⁵ For a further exploration of oral control in fairy tales, see Bright’s own adaptation of Hansel and Gretel, *Confessions Of a Trickbaby* (US 1999).

⁶ Two more modern texts of the story (James Thurber, Roald Dahl) have Little Red Riding Hood possess an automatic that she uses to swiftly blow him away. Both are humorous parodies of the story: Thurber’s, too, has a swipe at the overbearing morality of the Perrault version; Dahl’s lampoons the silliness of the story. These two variants both cast the Big Bad Wolf as a figure of ridicule and Little Red Riding Hood as a smarter girl. Their similarities to Bright’s re-casting of Little Red Riding Hood inevitably feed into a reading of the text. Both texts are included in Tatar 1999, 16-7 (Thurber), 21-2 (Dahl). For the texts in their original publications, see Thurber 1940, and Dahl [1982]1995.

him in the throat. In liberating herself from the clutches of the Big Bad Wolf, Vanessa stoops to her knees and throws up, the emission looking more like ejaculate than vomit.⁷ She has symbolically purged herself from the masculine forces, both sexually and in story-telling, that have orally suppressed her and, as she looks into the night sky, a comet swooshes past like a spermatozoa in the cosmos, both a herald for a new way forward and a liberation from male indoctrination. A hold has been broken, over the character of Little Red Riding Hood, and perhaps ourselves.

V

If *Freeway* uses its adaptive status to attempt to recalibrate its fictional text of known pattern, it can also be seen to challenge prevailing attitudes towards how meaning should be extracted. Saunders believes that “adaptation both appear to require and to perpetuate the existence of a canon, although it may in turn contribute to its on-going reformulation and expansion” (Saunders 2006, 8). I would suggest that it can go further and strive to smash that canon, one that has been created by a dominant ideology.

Wolverton is, despite a bullet to the head, not dead. His injuries transform him into a grotesque, animalistic creature, top lip pulled back through scar tissue, teeth constantly bared and indiscriminately slavering. His appearance frightens the children under his charge, so Vanessa has achieved a minor triumph. But she is seen by the authorities to be the monster, leading Wolverton astray to rob him. And popular fairy tales tell us what happens to bad little girls. A television set shows a newscast presented by a suited politician declaring that, “we need to put an end to the system that lets dangerous, violent thugs be prosecuted as juveniles rather than adults.” By the fact that this is screened on a separate medium within the cinema frame, this proclamation is positioned at a different level of reality. On closer inspection, it is actual CNN footage. The moral adherents to fairy tale retribution are preaching not in children’s bedrooms but in every household living room: the proof has been weaved into Bright’s fictive universe of adapted folklore. It is here that it might be useful to consider Saunders’ definition of ‘appropriation’, whereby a “political or ethical commitment” may “shape...a decision to reinterpret a source text” (Saunders 2006, 2).

“As the notion of hostile takeover present in a term such as ‘appropriation’ implies, adaptation can also be oppositional, even subversive. There are as many opportunities for divergence as adherence, for assault as well as homage” (Saunders 2006, 9).

⁷ Yoghurt was reportedly used on set to represent the upchuck.

When Vanessa is questioned by two detectives, Breer (Wolfgang Bodison) and Wallace (Dan Hedaya), they give her the opportunity to change her story: as it stands, she is liable to be tried as an adult, so heinous are her allegations against a man of the establishment. Her version has to be reconciled with a more reactionary, headline-friendly narrative caused by a perpetrator who can easily be demonised as a type, in this case a socially-aberrant juvenile. The state representatives superficially want Vanessa's adaptation to be faithful with an assumed text, one that edifies the populace just like the fairy tale. But Vanessa remains defiant: "I might not have to say what you all want to hear." Whilst interviewing her, Breer takes evident pleasure in exploring the girl's criminal record (arson, shoplifting). When he suggests that soliciting comes "natural" to her, Vanessa takes umbrage and attacks with pronouncement: "What, you think being a prostitute comes natural like being a nigger?" In being accused of biological immorality, she snaps back with a taunt of social injustice.

She is consigned to a juvenile penitentiary where she meets another pariah, the timorous Rhonda (Brittany Murphy), who is under penal "restriction" for touching another girl "all inappropriate." Throughout this sequence, Bright deploys elements of the 'women-in-prison' subgenre with spirited catfights, Sapphic confessions and anarchic unrest. Yet there is a conflict of register, these pop, parodic elements nestling amongst a montage of state-sponsored abjection, the 'real' horror that *Freeway* is contemplating. Images of Vanessa in solitary confinement accompany the warden's detached voiceover which only we know to be wrong: "This inmate appears to be a sophisticated criminal and an extreme danger to society... Diagnosis: anti-social personality disorder." Clover questions what the "self-ironising relation to taboo signifies, beyond a remarkably competent audience" that horror and cult cinema utilise (Clover 1992, 41). I would suggest that in making this connection to an exploitative subgenre within the notably clinical setting of the penitentiary, Bright is condemning the American penal system as histrionic and facile, its juvenile wrongdoers fetishised as sexually precocious types to be openly reviled yet secretly fantasised over by a public conscience, just as Wolverton and Breer do.

Freeway appropriates the tale of Little Red Riding Hood to assault the regressive dictum of the state, namely that those who do not conform to a social, or folkloric, narrative of an acquiescent, orthodox girl will be locked away and pacified, the ultimate goal to convict them as adults for maximum punishment. In other words, the young girls must suffer a vindictive, enforced maturity. But Vanessa, seizing an opportunity to escape her detention, sets herself on a path to evolve both as an archetype and a variant.

VI

The Final Girl has become a known pattern of the slasher film. Originally typified by Carol Clover, she is: “The only character to be developed in any psychological detail... She is intelligent, watchful, level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation” (Clover 1992, 44). Whilst *Freeway* is not a full-blown slasher flick, there is no doubting that Vanessa Lutz fits the description of its primary trope.

Cementing what was begun when Vanessa held Wolverton at gunpoint, a profound shift in identification begins to take over, as subtle and guileful as the strategies that first aligned the audience with the Big Bad Wolf. Following Vanessa’s initial suppression of Wolverton, a distinctly authored point-of-view shot stumbles down a hospital corridor, the image confusedly blurring. This drift in focus is not only representative of its bearer’s dazed state but also points to a viewpoint unsettled and mutable. When it is revealed to belong to Wolverton, with blood-blotched face and handkerchief held to his eye, it is a similar appearance to that of Vanessa in the previous scene, her face caked in plasma as she sits in a diner. They are both now marked as facets of the other, him looking ridiculous and faintly effeminate, she blithely calm and boyish.

From this point on, Vanessa takes centre-frame as she openly derides her antagonist in public, fools authority figures with confident aplomb, and sexually humiliates a kerb-crawler in his car. Vanessa has appropriated the Big Bad Wolf’s modus operandi, behaviourally and stylistically, with vengeance: “I’m pissed off and the whole world owes me,” she barks at her victim. The identification is absolute and doubly interactive, running *across* the text at a character level, for Vanessa to be able to deal with her adversary on even terms, and *through* the text at camera level, for her to coerce the audience into vicariously experiencing her indignation as she vows retribution.

Freeway now charges to its denouement, the scene where this Final Girl will prove victorious. Clover states that “when the Final Girl...assumes the ‘active, investigating gaze’, she exactly reverses the look, making a spectacle of the killer and a spectator of herself” (Clover 1992, 53). This is neatly played with as Vanessa prepares to act out Little Red Riding Hood’s most iconic scene of melodramatic inspection: dispensing with the childish charade, she leans over her grandmother and sighs, “There’s some big ugly teeth you got Bob.” Her position of privileged omniscience has become such that

her character has directly perceived that she is in an adaptation and refuses to perform the ritual, further emasculating Wolverton by denying him surprise and scorning his appearance, now dressed in floral overalls and shower cap. What was once a glib maniac pulsing with psychosexual rage is now a cut-price Norman Bates knock-off, his behavioural aberrance ridiculed as pantomime gender distress.

For Clover, the Final Girl is not a “heroine” who, “by the lights of folk tradition” needs to be saved by another, “but a hero, who rises to the occasion and defeats the adversary with his own wit and hands...The willingness of one immensely popular genre to represent the hero as an anatomical female would seem to suggest that at least one of the traditional marks of heroism, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine” (Clover 1992, 59–60). And so Vanessa makes a climactic spectacle of attacking the wolf with her bare fists as he impotently fires his weapon, vanquishing him without much tribulation, unlike earlier when she had the putative advantage of a handgun. For, after all, she has become fully aware of his waning, illustrative status as the Big Bad Wolf as her own flesh-and-blood significance has waxed. The victory through her own wiles and feminine brass, without an artefact gifted by a male protector, becomes revolutionary, smashing the canon of Little Red Riding Hood, one held ransom to the old texts of patriarchal agenda, and breaking the hold of the media that have suppressed the character. Vanessa Lutz emerges anew as a re-visioned, re-gendered hero, both saviour and living subject.

VII

In embracing the transgressive nature of one of horror cinema’s known folkloric patterns, the Final Girl, *Freeway* acts as neither sequel, prequel nor remake of its adaptive ascendancy: it rips it off, with the violence associated with the phrase. Its veneer abraded, Bright’s adaptation paradoxically remasculates the text that has been sanitised over the years through distasteful retellings borne out of moral disgust, and restores it to a darkly erotic allegory of sexual maturation.

Yet, far from being tragic, the ending is a happy one. Vanessa’s one desire as the detectives show up in the impetuous afterglow is to have a cigarette. The image freeze-frames her face in tasteful triumph. Little Red Riding Hood has finally come of age.

“The adaptation consumes the memory [of the text], aiming to efface it with the presence of its own images. The successful adaptation is the one that is able to replace the memory” (Ellis 1982, 3).

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*Poslednja devojka na autoputu:
adaptacija i apropijacija jedne bajke*

Bajke i njihove adaptacije nadilaze ustanovljene socijalne, kulturne i vremenske granice. Ovaj rad analizira film *Freeway* („Autoput“) Metjua Brajta (Matthew Bright), adaptaciju Crvenkapice koja namerno izvrće sadržaj postavljajući film u okvire generičkog horor filma. Birajući taj modus, Brajt delimično vraća bajku njenoj originalnoj svrsi, ona je nekada postojala kao folklorna priča prepuna melodrame, ali odlazi i korak dalje, kritikujući tekst „poznatog obrasca“ i prepravljajući ga tako da se dobija priča u kojoj nevina devojka, koja je napadnuta, sama ponovo uspostavlja svoj ekvilibrijum: efektivno tako što koristi motiv „poslednje devojke“ koji je uobičajen u slešer hororima.

„Autoput“ koristi svoj status adaptacije da radikalno reinterpreтира izvorni tekst, raspirujući svoj opozicioni nalet kroz žanr koji je najprimereniji subverziji. Kroz tekstualnu analizu, rad se bavi time kako Brajt koristi potencijal kinematografije kao medija kroz dvostruku interakciju, koja ne samo da dozvoljava kodirano otvaranje unutrašnjeg, intertekstualnog prostora adaptacije, već i antagonističkog susreta ukorenjenog u kontekstu horor filmova.

Ključne reči: adaptacija, identifikacija, intertekstualnost, gledalaštvo, transgresija

*La dernière fille sur l'autoroute:
adaptation et appropriation d'un conte de fée*

Les contes de fée et leurs adaptations transgressent les frontières sociales, culturelles et temporelles. Ce travail analyse le film *Freeway* (*Autoroute*) de Matthew Bright, adaptation du *Petit Chaperon rouge* qui délibérément met en exergue cette transgression en plaçant le film dans la catégorie des films d'hor-

reur. En choisissant ce mode, Bright restitue en partie sa finalité première au conte de fée, connu autrefois comme conte folklorique rempli de mélodrame; mais il va un pas plus loin, en critiquant le texte pour son « scénario/schéma connu » et en le remaniant de manière à ce que dans l'histoire la jeune fille innocente qui est attaquée rétablisse toute seule son équilibre: en effet, il utilise le motif de la « dernière fille » habituel dans les films d'horreur slasher.

Autoroute utilise sa capacité d'adaptation pour réinterpréter radicalement le texte originel, en fomentant son élan oppositionnel à travers le genre le plus approprié à la subversion. À travers l'analyse textuelle, l'article analyse comment Bright utilise le potentiel de la cinématographie en tant que média à travers une interaction double, qui non seulement permet la création d'un espace intérieur, intertextuel codé d'adaptation, mais aussi d'une rencontre antagoniste ancrée dans le contexte des films d'horreur.

Mots clés: adaptation, identification, intertextualité, spectateurs, transgression

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