

FROM PLOT OF *THE LITTLE MERMAID* TO THE “STORY” VERSIONS IN FILM ADAPTATIONS (FROM AN INTERTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE)

TỪ CỐT TRUYỆN NÀNG TIÊN CÁ ĐẾN CÁC PHIÊN BẢN “CÂU CHUYỆN” PHIM CHUYỂN THỂ (TỪ GÓC NHÌN LIÊN VĂN BẢN)

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Abstract - Literature and cinema are two art forms that share a strong and interconnected relationship. This is because they both originated from earlier forms of artistic expression and in every film, there are elements of painting, music, and, most notably, literature. To gain a clearer understanding of this relationship, the application of intertextual theory to analyze texts provides a convenient perspective. In this paper, we aim to clarify the process of literature-to-film adaptation, specifically focusing on Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* and its various film adaptations by Disney, through the lens of plot. Thus, we seek to demonstrate that intertextual theory is an open framework, one that is not confined to literature but can also be applied to the analysis of various other art forms.

Key words - intertextuality; *The Little Mermaid*; literature-to-film adaption; plot; Disney's film.

1. Introduction

As a “late-born” art form, cinema has always maintained close connections with pre-existing art forms, particularly literature. However, accurately perceiving the relationship between cinema and literature is not a simple matter, especially when film adaptations of literary works have traditionally been regarded as derivative products of secondary importance. Currently, with intertextual theory, the concept of adaptation has undergone significant changes. The adaptation process is now viewed as a process of (re)signification or (re)creation from pre-existing material to establish a new artistic code system, facilitating code transformation and interaction between the two art forms of literature and cinema.

Intertextuality is a theory proposed in the late 1960s by Bulgarian critic Julia Kristeva. “Every text is an intertext” - Kristeva developed this theory based on the philosophical foundations of Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin. They established the semantic nature of language and the potential for expanding word meanings in their numerous studies, asserting that language never exists independently but always reflects and parallels human culture and customs. Therefore, every sentence, word, and utterance in the present inherently contains shadows of what came before, whether the subject intends this or not. Intertextual research examines the correlations between the subject and its surrounding elements. This approach

Tóm tắt - Văn học và điện ảnh là hai loại hình nghệ thuật luôn có mối quan hệ bền chặt và tương quan lẫn nhau. Bởi lẽ, vì là loại hình nghệ thuật được ra đời từ nền tảng của các loại hình có trước, trong mỗi bộ phim đều mang dáng dấp của hội họa hay âm nhạc và đặc biệt nhất là văn học. Để có thể tiếp nhận một cách sáng tỏ về mối tương quan đó, việc lựa chọn lý thuyết liên văn bản để soi chiếu văn bản là một góc nhìn khá thuận tiện. Trong khuôn khổ bài viết, chúng tôi muốn làm rõ quá trình chuyển dịch văn học - điện ảnh, cụ thể là trường hợp truyện cổ tích *Nàng tiên cá* của Andersen và các phiên bản phim chuyển thể của Disney thông qua khía cạnh cốt truyện. Từ đây, chúng tôi muốn chứng minh rằng: lý thuyết liên văn bản là một góc nhìn mở, nó không chỉ bị giới hạn trong khuôn khổ văn chương mà còn có thể áp dụng để phân tích nhiều loại hình nghệ thuật khác nhau.

Từ khóa - Liên văn bản; *Nàng tiên cá*; chuyển thể văn học - điện ảnh; cốt truyện; phim của Disney.

involves reading a text through the lens of other texts, thereby illuminating the resonance of ideas and aesthetic qualities within the text, while simultaneously enabling parallel reading to discover similarities and differences between texts [1]. In Vietnam, since the late 20th century, Hoang Trinh has garnered critical acclaim in the field of literary criticism with his seminal work “From Semiotics to Poetics”. This contribution earned him the first Ho Chi Minh Prize in 1995 [2]. In 2019, Nguyen Van Thuan published the textbook “Intertextuality Theory” [1]. Additionally, regarding the issue of literary-to-cinematic adaptation from the perspective of intertextual theory, we recognize “Literary-Cinematic Adaptation: An Intertextual Study” by Le Thi Duong as a representative scholarly work in the field [3].

Building upon studies applying intertextual reading to decode literary works and their cinematic adaptations, we are particularly interested in Disney's ongoing trend of remaking classic animated films into live-action versions, such as *Aladdin* (2019), *The Lion King* (2019), *Mulan* (2020), *Pinocchio* (2022), and *The Little Mermaid* (2023). Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale “The Little Mermaid” has arguably been an essential part of childhood for millions of children worldwide. As an animation studio that frequently draws material from fairy tales, Disney has granted *The Little Mermaid* a significant position with two adapted films (the animated version in 1989 and the live-

action version in 2023), both warmly received by audiences globally. Several scholarly articles have compared the various story and film versions, such as Tran Le Hoa Tranh's "From Andersen's Mermaid to Walt Disney's Mermaid" [4], Zalfa Melanie Putri's "Comparison in animated films The Little Mermaid (1989) and versions adaptation live-action The Little Mermaid (2023)" [5], and more extensively, Pham Hoang Mai's dissertation "The Art of Character Building in Walt Disney Animated Films" [6].

In this paper, we analyze the adaptation process from the original plot of *The Little Mermaid* to its two film versions through an intertextual perspective, thereby contributing to the exploration of the transition from the verbal code of literature to the visual code of cinema. Throughout our research, we employ a combination of methodologies: intertextual research methods, analysis-synthesis methods, and typological research methods.

2. Adaptation of *The Little Mermaid's* plot from literature to cinema through an intertextual perspective

2.1. Film narrative development following the classic linear structure

Most Walt Disney films are adapted from fairy tales, and *The Little Mermaid* is no exception, being narrated according to the "pyramid" structure in a linear sequence. Both the story and films begin with the protagonist's goal, followed by complications and obstacles the main character encounters, and confrontations with the antagonist. Finally, there is a resolution leading to a happy ending.

In Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*, the little mermaid is the youngest daughter of the Sea King. She lives with her father, grandmother, and six mermaid sisters in a magnificent palace at the bottom of the ocean. The author describes her as a strange, quiet, and contemplative child. Her dream is to visit the land, to observe and love the world above the surface and all the humans living there. When the mermaid turns fifteen, she is permitted to rise to the water's surface to glimpse the human world. Her eyes inadvertently fall upon a prince on a sailing ship under the romantic night sky adorned with glowing fireworks. Suddenly, a storm strikes, causing the ship to rock violently amidst fierce waves until it breaks in half, endangering the prince and his crew. The little mermaid dives deep into the water, rescues the prince, and brings him safely to shore. By morning, when the storm subsides, she has given him a kiss on the forehead. From that moment, her longing to live on land intensifies. Hearing her wish, the sea witch entices the little mermaid to trade her melodious voice for human legs and the possibility of an immortal soul. These legs would be extraordinarily beautiful, but each step on land would feel like a thousand knives stabbing her feet. Once transformed into a human, she could never return to being a mermaid. She must win the prince's love to fully become human and gain an immortal soul; otherwise, on the morning after the prince marries another woman, the little mermaid would

dissolve into sea foam. The price for this gamble is steep, yet she accepts it. After drinking the witch's magical potion, the little mermaid transforms into a human with fair, delicate legs and small feet like any young maiden. However, she has no clothes, so she covers herself with her long, thick hair. The prince and mermaid become seemingly inseparable companions, yet the prince ultimately chooses to marry someone else - a princess from a neighboring kingdom whom he believes rescued him on the stormy night. If this marriage proceeds, the little mermaid will dissolve into sea foam, but her sisters find a way to help her. By taking the knife provided by the sea witch and stabbing the prince's heart, she could regrow her tail and return to live with her family in the palace. However, the little mermaid decides to preserve her love for the prince, choosing death for herself. Rather than dissolving as expected, she surprisingly transforms into an immortal spirit. This is considered a happy ending as the little mermaid achieves her goal: becoming human and obtaining an immortal soul [7].

In Disney's two film versions, the mermaid Ariel is not depicted with a grandmother figure from her past. The story begins with her burning desire to step into the beautiful world above the surface, to freely run, jump, and sing. The moment Ariel sees the prince, she falls deeply in love with him, intensifying her yearning to reach the shore. Despite her father Triton's prejudice that humans are dangerous creatures, Ariel remains determined to find her way to land. Following the sea witch Ursula's enticement, Ariel trades her crystal-clear voice for human legs. However, she must agree to a peculiar contract: she must receive a kiss of true love from the prince by sunset on the third day, or else she must return to being a mermaid and become Ursula's possession. In the film versions, there is no neighboring princess character preventing Ariel from marrying the prince. Instead, Ursula uses Ariel's stolen voice to bewitch the prince into marrying her, thereby easily preventing Ariel from fulfilling the contract. Eventually, the witch achieves her goal: capturing the mermaid and even Triton's soul when he tries to save his daughter. However, the human prince bravely jumps into the water to attack the sea witch, rescuing the girl he loves despite Ariel being in her mermaid form. The young couple struggles desperately against the witch. In the end, good triumphs over evil - they successfully destroy the wicked witch Ursula, and Ariel lives happily ever after with the prince in human form.

If Aristotle stated that plots in drama or literature typically have three parts - Beginning, Development, Climax and Conclusion - then films similarly have three acts. In the opening, filmmakers establish the setting and introduce the protagonist and character system. Here, the main character forms a new goal or ideal, creating curiosity for the audience about the character's journey to accomplish this mission. For instance, in both the fairy tale and the two film adaptations, the little mermaid (Ariel) shares the same objective: to become human and win the prince's love. After approximately one-third of the content, the film enters the Development stage - the portion

occupying the most time and content. Here, conflicts repeatedly follow a pattern of resolution followed by escalation to stronger conflicts. In *The Little Mermaid*, the mermaid's process of becoming human and winning the prince's love is far from easy. "Obstacles" continuously appear, making her goal difficult to achieve: from losing her voice to become human, to the prince mistakenly believing someone else rescued him during the storm, to the sea witch successfully hindering her goals. In the final part - Climax and Conclusion - the story and films resolve conflicts and build to climaxes in very different ways. First, the deadline given by the witch for the mermaid to obtain the prince's love kiss differs. In one version, it's dawn on the third day, after which the mermaid would dissolve into sea foam if unsuccessful; in the other, it's sunset on the third day, after which Ariel would become a soul serving the witch, forever unable to return to either mermaid or human form. In the original story, the author denies the mermaid her wish - she fails to fulfill her agreement with the witch before the deadline. However, because of her kind heart, one of her two wishes comes true: the little mermaid transforms into an immortal soul capable of helping people. When adapting the story, filmmakers changed the ending: although Ariel doesn't receive the kiss before the deadline and Ursula captures her soul, with help from the prince and King Triton, she returns to human form, regains her voice, and lives happily with the prince forever.

Disney chose to maintain the linear storytelling as a safe choice to attract the "ready-made" audience from fairy tales. Although this storytelling approach is quite traditional, it doesn't diminish the appeal or "drawing power" of either film. The chronological sequence helps both readers and viewers easily follow the story, making both the tale and films accessible to children and adults alike.

2.2. *The perfect happy ending*

In the original text, Hans Christian Andersen gave the little mermaid a positive ending: she obtains an immortal soul. Although she doesn't win the prince's love, her kind heart and self-sacrifice for love earn her an immortal soul for 300 years instead of dissolving into sea foam like other merfolk. This story conveys the value of sacrifice and unconditional love. The little mermaid willingly gives up her voice, abandons the deep sea and her family, and endures pain to become human - all out of her unconditional love for the prince. *The Little Mermaid* also demonstrates acceptance and letting go. When she discovers that the prince loves someone else, rather than becoming jealous like many other girls might, she accepts the truth and releases this love. Despite her sisters' advice to kill the prince to return to mermaid form, the little girl chooses to protect that beautiful love, accepting her fate to dissolve into sea foam. Overall, Andersen's fairy tale isn't as rosy as many other fairy tales. Beyond celebrating beautiful love, the story reflects the complex aspects of life. Joy, pain, disappointment, and happiness are emotional ranges everyone must experience to mature, including the little mermaid. She doesn't have the "halo" of a typical

protagonist; she constantly struggles to achieve what she wants, and there are things she simply cannot obtain no matter how hard she tries.

Although both film versions of *The Little Mermaid* by Walt Disney remain fairly faithful to the original story, the endings were significantly altered. In both the 1989 animated version and the live-action remake, the conclusion shows Ariel becoming human and finding true love with the human prince. Ariel and Eric's wedding receives approval and blessings from both tribes. However, the ending in the live-action version is deeper and conveys more messages compared to the purely fairy-tale happy ending of the 1989 animated version. In the live-action film, during her son's important wedding day, Eric's mother takes Ariel's hand and advises her: "Our two worlds have misunderstood each other for too long. Your wedding marks a new beginning. Go to sea and change the world". This dialogue is not only a mother's advice to her child but also represents hope for an open future. Eric and Ariel's story continues beyond the wedding - they still have a journey full of hardships and challenges waiting for them. Additionally, the 2023 version addresses the issue of harmonious coexistence between the mermaid tribe and humans.

In general, the conclusion of the 1989 version of *The Little Mermaid* conveyed a message about women's freedom to determine their own lives, asserting their right to pursue love and happiness on their own terms. Furthermore, unlike the original text where the mermaid alone accepts self-sacrifice for love, the film adaptation portrays both Ariel and the prince fighting together to protect each other without regard for their own safety. They love and trust each other unconditionally; even when tempted and deceived by the witch Ursula, the prince steadfastly believes in Ariel as the true love of his life. Building upon this foundation, the 2023 cinematic adaptation further incorporates ideals of racial diversity and ethnic respect through the casting of a Black female actress for Ariel's role, while Ariel's sisters also represent women from various regions across the world. As previously mentioned, the prince's mother's statement functions as an appeal for peaceful coexistence among the world's diverse races and ethnicities.

2.3. *Encountering familiar motifs again*

As an author specializing in fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen frequently drew upon materials from folk literature. Consequently, familiar motifs often appear throughout his works. Adapting fairy tales has been a particular strength of Disney, as the studio has consistently achieved success with productions such as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", "Alice in Wonderland", "Cinderella", and others. As a result, this film studio has become quite familiar with and proficient in constructing the motifs that regularly appear in folk tales.

2.3.1. *The motif of good triumphing over evil*

In Hans Christian Andersen's original *The Little Mermaid* text, the relationship between the witch and the mermaid is fundamentally not one of confrontation or a

struggle between good and evil. Andersen constructed the witch as a character with a gift-giving or supportive function. Her appearance serves to help the mermaid fulfill her wish to become human; she also warns the mermaid about what she must sacrifice and the risks the small mermaid might face in this journey. Even when the mermaid is about to fail to fulfill their agreement before the deadline, the witch provides her with a contingency plan. Through the plea of her sisters, the witch gives them a knife, saying this is the only opportunity to save her. If the mermaid stabs the prince's heart with this knife, she could avoid dissolving into sea foam.

However, in the adaptation, the filmmakers changed the relationship between these two characters, dividing them into good and evil camps, and transferring the supportive function to the father king - a character whose function in the original story was rather insignificant. Disney thoroughly transformed the witch into a villainous character. In the film, this character is depicted as an octopus with a human upper body. Taking advantage of animation's strengths, the 1989 version freely exaggerated this character's appearance and personality to the point of absurdity. The witch Ursula, with her two henchmen - electric eels - constantly seeks to lure naïve merfolk into her schemes. With sweet temptations about what merfolk could achieve by becoming human, she ensures that when they fail to fulfill their agreements, their souls become entirely hers. Her enticement of young Ariel is also part of a plot to reclaim the power currently held by Triton, her brother.

At times, this character also has moments of foolishness, which further enhances her absurd and grotesque nature. For instance, while disguised as the girl who rescued the prince, during a song revealing her plan, Ursula allows the seagull Scuttle to overhear her. Consequently, her scheme is exposed. This plot element serves as a stepping stone to propel the story toward its climax, leading to the film's conclusion. The final third of the film is the phase where the protagonists unite against the antagonist - Ursula. The humorous elements added in this section help mock the villain's cruelty and the foolishness of her plan. Examples include scenes of Ursula struggling with the protagonists over the shell necklace containing Ariel's voice, with assistance from the dog Max. Clearly, Disney has made the witch's falls and body movements extremely comical.

Although a villainous character, Ursula also serves as a functional character. The difficulties she creates for Ariel during her quest to fulfill the agreement drive the story's development. Simultaneously, these challenges reveal the personalities and qualities of the characters. The presence of the antagonist helps elevate the protagonist. Consequently, the main character's victory becomes logical and convincing to viewers. Disney's transformation of this character's function has made the film fresher and more interesting, attracting both new audiences and those already familiar with Andersen's story.

2.3.2. *The animal-to-human transformation motif*

The motif of animals transforming into humans has long appeared in mythological stories and folk tales. We

can mention the god Zeus in Greek mythology. Despite being an all-powerful, mighty deity, his wife was jealous by nature, so Zeus often transformed into a swan to pursue Leda - the queen of Sparta. In Vietnam, there are also stories containing this motif. In the "Wind God" mythology, the Wind God's child was punished for mischievously creating storms by being transformed into a mustard plant that signals wind. In summary, this is a fairly common motif that appears widely in traditional stories across the world.

Unlike the good-triumphing-over-evil motif, the animal-to-human transformation motif appears in both the original story and film adaptations. In *The Little Mermaid*, Andersen used this motif based on folk literature traditions, and it has become the famous, distinctive feature of this story. The image of a half-human, half-fish girl trading her voice to become human in search of love has become extremely popular. Beyond Disney, countless artistic works worldwide have drawn inspiration from this detail. Films featuring mermaids mostly incorporate this motif, such as: "The Legend of the Blue Sea" produced by South Korea in 2017, "The Lure" produced by Poland in 2015, "The Mermaid" produced by China in 2016, and others.

In *The Little Mermaid*, the animal-to-human transformation motif expresses the mermaid's desire to explore and integrate into the human world. Having a human body serves as a disguise that helps the mermaid easily interact and blend into human life without being noticed, criticized, or even hunted by humans. This human disguise is that of a beautiful girl, with new legs that are long and straight - legs that every girl would desire. This is a perfect form that helps the mermaid captivate the prince at first sight, giving her an advantage in fulfilling her agreement to obtain a kiss of true love from the man she loves. However, many researchers question: Why are characters who transform into humans typically female? To explain this, we need to look back at the principle of the Maternal in mythology [8, p.12]. In both Eastern and Western religious cultures, women symbolize origins and fertility. Throughout societal development, human society gradually eliminated many of the rights and roles of women. In a patriarchal society, all decision-making power belongs to men, while women serve only as emotional support for "heroes". Sometimes, women are even associated with loss and disaster when warriors become too enamored with beauty. In *The Little Mermaid* and its two film adaptations of the same name, artists have restored women's rights, at least the right to their own lives. Although the story's setting in both the tale and films is a patriarchal society - where the king, the highest authority, is male - the mermaid still freely pursues her life's love, something forbidden to women in patriarchal societies. Yet, the mermaid chooses to defy her father king, seeking her true happiness in that strange land above, actively deciding her own fate regardless of consequences.

At the end of her journey to achieve her life's goal, the mermaid in each version receives a deserved ending. This shows how the animal-to-human transformation motif expresses a view of the happy human world, while also

demonstrating the artist's progressive perspective on women finding love and protecting their own interests.

Additionally, the animal-to-human transformation motif appears not only in protagonists but also in antagonists. Primarily, antagonists transform into humans to execute their schemes or prevent protagonists from achieving their goals. The witch character (Ursula) initially appears as an ugly octopus. However, to prevent Ariel from fulfilling her agreement, she transforms into a beautiful girl, possessing Ariel's heaven-given melodious voice, thereby enticing the prince that she was the one who rescued him. Nevertheless, the filmmakers' intention in developing this transformation motif for this character is not extensive. As mentioned, Disney added this plot element to escalate the story's conflict to its climax, driving the narrative toward its conclusion [8].

3. Conclusion

Based on what has been presented previously, we can broadly observe the process of literature-to-film adaptation in terms of plot structure from the perspective of intertextuality theory. Examining the adaptation case of *The Little Mermaid* fairy tale, the filmmakers built their cinematic versions on the artistic foundation of the fairy tale. Although presented as films, they still maintain the structural characteristics and motifs of fairy tales. In this article, we have summarized the following points:

First, Disney's animated film *The Little Mermaid* and the live-action film of the same name have preserved the linear plot structure of the original text. Conflicts and important plot elements have been constructed according to the "pyramid" model. However, the filmmakers did not maintain all the story details as in Andersen's version but changed certain elements to suit the genre and the tastes of film audiences.

Second, not only were some details from the fairy tale

transformed during filmmaking, but even the ending was constructed by the filmmakers in a direction and spirit very different from the original text. While the fairy tale's ending conveyed a message about kindness and sublime love, the endings of both film adaptations contain much more. They represent a change in perspective regarding women's self-determination of their lives, or even beautiful messages about harmonious coexistence between different ethnic groups in the world.

Third, the motifs appearing in the various versions of *The Little Mermaid* are familiar motifs from folk literature works. However, whether these motifs were applied randomly by the artists or not, they all carry their own intentions and messages.

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