

**Stephanie Hill**

**“Points of Contact”: Co-Positioning Improvisation and Adaptation Theory and Practice**

**An Interview with Dr. Linda Hutcheon**

Dr. Linda Hutcheon, an Officer of the Order of Canada and University of Toronto Professor Emeritus, is a recognized scholar of adaptation theory as well as an ICASP Advisory Board member. In the following email interview with ICASP graduate student Stephanie Hill, Dr. Hutcheon talks about the relationship between improvisation and adaptation. Her seminal book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, is an extensive and multi-contextual survey of contemporary adaptation. In it, she challenges the fidelity model of adaptation and speaks to the driving forces behind the creation of adaptations. Given Dr. Hutcheon’s participation in interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship and her work in “what art teaches us about theory” (“Linda Hutcheon”), I was eager to hear what she might have to offer in terms of a comparison between improvisation and adaptation practices. Dr. Hutcheon’s support of ICASP in combination with her expertise in adaptation studies give her a unique positioning from which to consider the two fields together.

The impetus for this interview stems from my graduate studies this year, which involved both the study of improvisation and adaptations. My desire to use each term in this particular way—‘adaptation’ as a noun, ‘improvisation’ as a verb—speaks to adaptations being associated with a discrete product, while improvisation is often characterized as a process. I have often wondered about the different contexts in which each term is deployed and what a juxtapositioning of the two terms might reveal about both. As Dr. Hutcheon asks in the following interview, what are the “points of contact between these two concepts that need to be examined more fully”?

Both fields differ in their concern with fidelity to precedent forms—how closely a film adaptation, for example, may or may not resemble the literary work which inspired its creation. ‘Free’

improvisational practices are characterized by their distance from analytical preoccupations of fidelity to source material. In these practices, it is difficult (if not impossible) to find the linkages between a creative product and the infinite number of ‘texts’ which have coalesced to produce it. In contrast, popular and scholarly adaptation studies are preoccupied with the degree to which a work is ‘true’ to its (seemingly stable) source material. In addition to Dr. Hutcheon, other scholars (such as Andre Bazin, Colin MacCabe, James Naremore) have written about the need for a disruption of fidelity models in critical adaptation studies.

In the interview below, Dr. Hutcheon offers provocative insights regarding the ‘re-creative’ work of both the fields of adaptation and improvisation. What is particularly interesting is her attention to systems of valuation, both between the two fields and among the various artists practicing within them. As she states, “adaptation has cultural connotations of being secondary and derivative,” an observation which reveals much about the limiting affective climate an artist practicing ‘adaptation’ may encounter. An artist creating a piece that he or she might call an ‘adaptation’ (that is, a piece that specifically delineates a relationship to a source work) is working within a relatively inflexible structure. Perhaps this is why improvisation needs to continue as a separate field, one in which individual agency and creative response finds its honouring. A bleeding between the way in which both forms are practiced may provide the ‘counter-fidelity’ model adaptation scholars have been seeking, one in which a faithfulness to relational dynamics (both to self and to community) is valued above the rigid crafting of something ‘original’ in response to a well-established source text.

**Stephanie:** If we consider ‘improvisation’ and ‘adaptation’ together, what might emerge? What has been your experience of the relationship between improvisation and adaptation—do you think this is an important relationship to examine?

**Linda:** To be perfectly honest, until you raised the issue, I hadn’t thought about it in any detail. That said, now that you have, I think there are definite points of contact between these two concepts that

need to be examined more fully.

**Stephanie:** Do you have any thoughts on what insights examining this relationship might yield (perhaps for both the fields of improvisation and adaptation)?

**Linda:** I think that distinctions between the two will help clarify some of the differences, but also the clear similarities between the two. And such distinctions are always helpful in a theoretical context—not to say in a practical one.

**Stephanie:** Can you have improvisation without adaptation, or vice versa?

**Linda:** Well, not all adaptation is improvisation, as I understand it. First of all, improvisation is usually (always?) extemporaneous, isn't it? And most adaptation is not. But improvisation very often involves adaptation. It might be a matter of degree, ranging from (in music) free jazz to jazz "standards." In other words, if a musical piece is an improvisation on a theme (melody) or the notes of a chord (harmony), or maybe even a song form or style, it would definitely be considered an adaptation of that element. In other words, adaptation is the word we tend to use to describe an overt and indeed defining relation to another prior text: it is an adaptation OF something. That doesn't mean it isn't an autonomous work in and of itself, but when we call it an adaptation we are focusing on the fact that it is a reworking of a prior text. As I understand improvisation (especially in free jazz), that need not be the case, though it may indeed be so.

**Stephanie:** Are improvisation and adaptation the same thing—i.e. 'repetition with variation'? If they are essentially the same, why are they studied separately?

**Linda:** While I agree that the kind of improvisation I describe above can be described as repetition with variation, not all improvisation is: I'm thinking of free jazz, once again, which moves away from such "adapting" of prior elements or texts. So while I do believe adaptation studies should include, for

instance, work on jazz improvisation on a theme (or harmony, style, or form)—which I would consider a form of adaptation—it might be a kind of categorical error, perhaps, to make all improvisation into adaptation.

**Stephanie:** Does the term ‘improvisation’ imply an ‘in-the-moment’ practice that the word ‘adaptation’ does not? Would this explain why we don’t use the terms ‘jazz adaptation’ or ‘dance adaptation’ (i.e. as opposed to ‘improvisation’)?

**Linda:** Yes, I think that there is an “in-the-moment” or extemporaneous, process-orientation associated, for instance, with jazz improvising by musicians while performing, whereas with adaptation—the arranging process involved in writing song covers, for example—the process precedes performance and the result is even written down beforehand. Of course, some improvising might go on during an actual performance of the cover, but the process of adapting occurred previously.

**Stephanie:** Does the term ‘improvisation’ imply a different relationship between a source work and its adaptations—for example, if we call a work a ‘film improvisation’ vs. a ‘film adaptation,’ does this change how we feel about it? Would we be less concerned with issues of fidelity if we did use the term ‘film improvisation’ instead of ‘adaptation’? (I agree with you, that using fidelity as a means of evaluation seems “unproductive” (Hutcheon 31)).

**Linda:** As I mentioned above, some improvisations are indeed based on a previous work, as all adaptations, by definition, are. But the process orientation, what you call “in-the-moment” nature of improvisation means that I think it’s hard to think of traditional film as an improvisatory medium: it ends up with a fixed text, and if that fixed text bears a relationship to a prior text, it will be an adaptation of it. That said, there are new digital forms of interactive film that might well qualify as a kind of improvisation for users, if not for creators. While “fidelity criticism” seems to us both unproductive as the sole means of studying works and their adaptations, we can never deny that

adaptations do have a relationship to a prior text, so we have to deal with that.

**Stephanie:** Does the term ‘adaptation’ suggest a goal-oriented creative outcome not associated with ‘improvisation’? The varying definitions of ‘adaptation’ certainly suggest the desiring of a narrowly defined product and of a movement that occurs uni-directionally from source to adaptation (for example, when we say someone is ‘adapting to a loss’ or that an organism has ‘adapted’ to survive). Is the contextual baggage associated with the word ‘adaptation’ limiting for artists?

**Linda:** Yes, I think your designation of “goal-orientation” works well for adaptation. While we use the word to describe the process of adapting, we also use it to define the product, the adaptation of a prior work. Improvisation may well be “improvisation upon a prior work” but it doesn’t have to be, or so I understand it! I think “process” is a larger part of the sense of improvisation than “goal”, even when it is upon a prior work.

**Stephanie:** Do you have any thoughts on how the context in which an artist ‘repeats with variation’ may affect the creative product(s)? I am thinking of how it may be helpful to a performer to call what they are doing an ‘adaptation’ (i.e. implying a direct relationship with a source or precedental work) vs. calling it an ‘improvisation’ (with perhaps less of a clear link to what has come before)... Perhaps creating within the context of ‘adaptation’ gives an artist’s work a supportive/helpful frame or a mooring in a creative genealogy?

**Linda:** To be honest, I hadn’t thought of that: I’ve always prized improvisation because it did NOT necessarily have that frame or mooring. But I see your point. In more conservative (academic?) terms, I can see that one might want such mooring, but it would only be there if the improvising artist were indeed working with a theme/harmony/form/style that existed beforehand. With free jazz improvisation, it would not be the same, right? I’m not a musicologist or a jazz specialist, so I rely on your correcting me! Interestingly, though, I’ve always thought that jazz improvisers were much more

valued as creators than were adapters: screenplay writers, for instance, are never as respected as directors and actors. Adaptation has cultural connotations of being secondary and derivative. Jazz does not.

**Stephanie:** Does ‘adaptation’ imply an inter-modality that is not associated with ‘improvisation’? Do we commonly ‘improvise’ within one artistic modality and ‘adapt’ across one or more?

**Linda:** Another interesting distinction! While most adaptations are across media (literature to film, for example), not all are: Robert Lepage did a play adaptation (*Elsinore*) of a play (*Hamlet*) and, of course, song covers and remakes of films are also adaptations within the same modality. So I’m not convinced that this would be a distinguishing characteristic of adaptation vs. improvisation.

**Stephanie:** You note that “form changes with adaptation” while “the content persists” (Hutcheon 10)—is the same true in improvisation? Is the ‘form’ we are working with perhaps more subtle in improvisational contexts?

**Linda:** More subtle or more complex, or both. Content in music is a more complicated thing than in film or literature. In music, we could talk of melody or harmony, or other things that might seem like form, but are also content. I think with improvisation in music, both the form and content would constitute the space of improvisation in a way that is rather different from adaptation.

### Works Cited

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013. Print.

“Linda Hutcheon.” *Improvisation, Community and Social Practice*. ICASP, n.d. Web. 1 Jul. 2013.