

Overriding Values: Locating Post-9/11 Anxieties in Adaptation and Youth Culture

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Abstract:

Robert Stam's "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" contends that alterations in adapted texts can be attributed to "ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (57). Adaptors may utilize a familiar text from the past, but the cultural climate they share with their audience will override the values and anxieties found in the earlier expression. Stam further explains "the greater the lapse of time...the more likely the reinterpretation [will occur] through the values of the present" (57). The most recent adaptations of *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (2010), *Red Dawn* (2012), and *How I Live Now* (2013) invite a textual reformulation that demonstrates Stam's suggestion. All three films, adaptations in their own right, allow post-9/11 cultural anxieties and ideologies to replace the post-Cold war anxieties that marked their earlier expression. Moreover, all three films specifically locate the more current anxieties and ideologies in youth and youth culture, which teen audiences will consider as they shape the world in which they live.

Keywords:

Youth Culture, Post-9/11 Anxieties, Adaptation, Pop Culture, Textual Reformulation

Robert Stam's "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" contends that alterations in adapted texts can be attributed to "ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (57). The source text can be "reworked by a boundless context" that changes the way the adapted text is viewed (57). Stam submits that the text is "an open structure" that serves more

as a guideline, not a rule. Adaptors may utilize a familiar text from the past, but they will let the cultural climate they share with their audience override the values and anxieties found in the earlier expression. This is especially true when a great deal of time passes between the original and adapted text (57). These overriding values affirm the “ever-shifting grids of interpretation” Stam mentions; because the writer resituates the text through the values they “read” within the text (57). Therefore, the adaptation fleshes out on a cultural level what the adaptor recognizes and deems relevant within the source text.

Stam’s idea changing interpretations can shape discussion of Australia’s *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (2010), America’s *Red Dawn* (2012), and England’s *How I Live Now* (2013). All three films are adapted from roughly the same time period, but are products of three different continents, yet these adaptations are united by their reformulation of cultural values and anxieties. Additionally, these films retain the overall structure of the source text they adapt, but they readjust the presentation of the story through the lens of present ideologies and anxieties. The lapse of time, small as it is, and the geographical distance between the source texts and the adaptations encourage a consideration as to what adaptors now find culturally relevant. While all three adaptations preserve the story found in their originals, all three also adopt plots that adapt their source texts from Cold War anxieties to post-9/11 anxieties. In this way, the adaptors in these three films can be shown to develop what is relevant to them while filtering out what isn’t relevant. For instance, *Red Dawn* in 2012 maintains the same story of youths combating invading forces, but the update presents its story through terroristic rather than Red Scare ideologies. Stam’s understanding that time and place alter the way in which a text is rewritten prescribes a reformulation of the texts for the purpose of relevancy. An adaptation’s foundation may remain the same, but the reformulated text that is built upon that foundation differs due to changing ideologies. Thus, reading these three films as a reformulation of anxieties specific to youth culture can be a useful tool which illuminates two things above the film: (1) Audiences are able to experience a cathartic release that reflects the ability to experience and work through anxieties, and (2) that film can provide youth culture with a medium with which to access topics they would miss out on otherwise.

It is possible to put textual reformulation in conversation with youth culture. The task herein is to consider the how popular culture

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texts such as *Tomorrow*, *When the War Began*, *Red Dawn*, and *How I Live Now* can be examined with youth culture in mind in order to tease out cultural anxieties often found within the youth of current times. The adaptations of these texts not only provide an interesting look into shifting interpretations of post-Cold War concepts into post-9/11 concepts, but also illustrate the way in which these three texts have become more similar in their representations across geographical boundaries. While the scope of this study has narrowed so as to specifically focus on youths who will culturally inherit the responsibilities of managing these anxieties, the paper considers the way each country's film adaptation overlaps and widens the discourse between cultures. There is always much to say with regard to the differences between cultures, but this paper makes space to discuss the usefulness in locating and unpacking the similarities that transcend geographical divides. Thus, the three teen war films become more interesting when one recognizes that various nations confront ideological assumptions that extend beyond a specific culture's social values pertaining to the youth of one country. Instead, the social values appear to be relevant to Australia's, America's, and England's youth simultaneously no matter how these teens may differ culturally in their daily lives.

Yet, before diving into the reformulation of these texts, it is necessary to layout key concepts such as popular culture, youth culture, and cultural anxieties. One may be tempted to define structures of popular culture that surrounds these youths; however, to examine popular culture is to understand its resistance to definition. There is no uniform set of criteria that points to what cultural elements will be included or excluded from the realm of popular culture. Instead, it seems that, when one attempts to define or recognize the cultural element, the element is no longer a part of popular culture. Holt N. Parker, a popular culture scholar, points to Hitchcock films as an example of how something can be a part of popular culture, yet lose its popular culture title over time due to people attempting to locate its cultural value. Hitchcock films were a popular phenomenon initially, but, when these films became authorized and recognized, they became something to be shown in art houses as opposed to a general movie theater (167). Texts, like the films by Hitchcock, are meant to be left open as opposed to closed. Recognition and definition directly conflicts with popular culture, because it sets limitations on the text. According to Parker, popular culture "ceases to be popular when it is authorized"

(166). What results is an artifact that is no longer popular culture. Instead, the artifact becomes a high culture art piece that loses its connection to the people.

Within the umbrella of popular culture, there exists the notion of youth culture. Distinguishing youth culture characteristics from the entirety of popular culture furthers the scope of study in all three adaptations, so as to specifically locate anxieties youth and youth culture. In *Children and Society*, Gerald Handel *et al* claims that adolescents “focus more on the present” activities of “youth culture” such as high school drama, football games, parties, and reputations (319). Youth culture’s distance from dangerous realities hinders their ability to fully recognize the stakes of post 9/11 anxieties. Handel explains that youth culture is a social construct that revels in the “good time” mentality (318). “Downer” mindsets are often left for the adult world for which these teens may stress a “general opposition” (319). However, fear of invasion and how youth culture in the Western world would handle such situations has become a topic of interest since the events of 9/11. Exploring these anxieties allows teen war films to consider the conflict that takes place when ideological assumptions are confronted by realized anxieties. The three adaptations can engage teens with manifestations of anxieties that are culturally relevant while exposing the particular elements reformulated in these three texts.

Evaluating popular culture texts through a focus on youth culture can show why changing ideologies take place. Anxieties alter over time due to culturally impacting events that younger generations then give cultural relevance to through various forms of discourse. Mark Lacy discusses cultural anxiety and why it manifests in popular expressions in his work titled “War, Cinema, and Moral Anxiety.” Lacy describes anxiety as a “dangerous, destabilizing force” that exists within a citizen’s ability to reflect upon the unsecure cultural climate in which they live (617). The “sense of unease over economic rationalities” generates anxiety based on the current political climates that dictate and undermine ideological values (617). Following Lacy, the changing anxieties within the three adaptations stem from evolving cultural attitudes that have erupted in the midst of post 9/11 unease. Teen war films, for instance, (re)produce cultural anxieties in an attempt to “give the viewer proximity to events that populations in the developed world [are] distanced from” (630). Lacy suggests that cinema can potentially “awaken moral anxiety” within viewers by providing them with a space

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for cultural self-evaluation (617). This self-evaluation suggests that the cultural and/or political strife we are currently invested in assigns anxiety. Therefore, teen war films can construct cultural anxieties so viewers can experience and work through the fears that are relevant to current ideological conflicts.

The ideological differences mentioned above can be most succinctly captured through a distinction between post-Cold War and Post 9/11 ideologies. According to Donald Fishman, the Cold War is best described as “an ideological contest” where “ideas, symbols, and iconography” were utilized to “influence public opinion” in order to perpetuate anxiety (43). For instance, the use or description of the color red, internal spies, children practicing “duck and cover” under the classroom desks, cynicism, and bomb shelters (just to name a few) remark on the pervasive nature of post-Cold War anxieties that continued to exist in cultural expressions in film and literature during and after the Cold War. The three original texts exhibit these traits, and utilizes them in order to construct the “imaginative” threat. In this case, imaginative doesn’t mean “not tangibly there,” but actually refers to the threats audiences can build upon through assumptions and fear. Moreover, while these perceptions are those that audiences can recognize, they lack the ability to disarm these threats. For instance, in the novel, *Tomorrow, When the War Began* the audience can only imagine what is happening to the people of Australia when the teens discover everyone is detained inside of tents at the carnival arena. This scene uses no known instrument of war except for fear and intimidation in this instance. The source texts created scenarios that allowed respondents to construct and address fears of the Post-Cold War era, and encouraged audiences to debate the currency of the ideological war fought.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks forever altered the way culture most generally, but youth culture more particularly, responded to the fear of attack. The imaginary threat became tangible, and cultural expression began producing texts that assume the mindset of what Tom Pyszczynski discusses as Terror Management Theory. This theory juxtaposes the “biological pre-disposition toward self-preservation” with the “awareness of the inevitability of death gives rise to potentially overwhelming terror” (27). Pyszczynski then surmises this “potential for terror is managed by the construction and maintenance of cultural worldviews” which seek to reaffirm one’s cultural validity (27). Following

these assertions, one can make the case that Western culture has devoted its entertainment sector to managing post-9/11 anxieties by validating that these anxieties are culturally relevant. Instead of focusing on the “imaginative” threat, these three adaptations focus on the tangible experience of 9/11, terroristic qualities, out of nowhere violence, shock and awe, and an increased sense of patriotism. After 9/11, the cultural fears that were felt no longer sided with the “imaginative” war, but rather sided with the “terroristic war.” The three adaptations illustrate that, after 9/11, popular culture texts became much more concerned with the sudden, surprise attack; the survival of our culture, and the patriotism that it takes to defend our way of life rather than the fear of impending war, the ideological battlefield, and the cynicism that plagued Post-Cold War texts. Therefore, post-9/11 anxieties, while still recognizing fear, remark on a different, more current anxiety that seeks to make sense of the terroristic possibilities of future attacks.

The original and adaptation of *Tomorrow, When the War Began* express anxieties that are specific to the era in which they were produced. The overall storyline of both texts explores what could happen in the event of an invasion by following the efforts of eight Australian teens that have been thrust into the adult reality of war. In John Marsden’s 1993 novel, the scene that best illustrates post-Cold War anxieties is the scene where Ellie (the narrator) is “transformed.” In this scene, Ellie, Corrie, and Kevin make their way to the showground in hopes of figuring out what is going on in their hometown of Wirrawee. Ellie notes that this is her first encounter with true risk and danger, and that she “started becoming someone else, a more complicated and capable person” (80). The new sense of purpose carries her to the fence where she first sees the showground full of tents. It is not until a person emerges from the tents as a prisoner that Ellie understands what the tents are hiding. This scene forces Ellie to imagine what could be happening to her people inside those tents while also inviting readers to consider the cultural anxieties of the early 1990s. Even though the scene only shows tents and guards, the implied post-Cold War anxieties that were familiar before 2001 can be identified. Therefore, the novel can be understood as a time stamp of the cultural attitudes through which it was produced.

Similarly, the 2010 film of *Tomorrow, When the War Began* exposes the vulnerability of certain cultural attitudes by working through the same scene at the showground. However, the adaptation confronts more recent occurrences by replacing Cold War anxieties with post-

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9/11 anxieties. This time, when Ellie (Caitlin Stasey), Corrie (Rachel Hurd-Wood), and Kevin (Lincoln Lewis) go to the fair grounds to get a better idea of what is happening, the scene overrides the imaginative threats within the tents, and instead employs flat-out terror through surprise violence. As Ellie crawls under a vehicle to get a better look, the audience sees her face turn to shock. The camera then cuts from Ellie by panning up to give the audience a full image of the scene. Unlike the tents in the original text, the adaptation features the image of people crowded everywhere as if they were cattle in a feedlot. Ellie tries to make sense of the scene, and notices one man who begins to cause a ruckus by getting out of line and voicing his opinions. This man is immediately apprehended by two invaders while a third walks up and indifferently puts a gun to the captive man's head and pulls the trigger. Instantly the crowds of people begin to scream, and Ellie is confronted with the reality that the people she grew up with are dying, or are already dead. The image shatters any imaginative threat of the 1990s text. The audience and Ellie see tangible evidence of the invasion. This reformulation of the source text reinforces how the 9/11 attacks mold our fears and films through continual reconditioning of our cultural expressions.

While *Tomorrow* makes use of the teens' lack of knowledge about what is happening to their families at the showground, the 1984 version of *Red Dawn* takes a more cynical approach. The teens in this film question whether or not they are right for fighting against the invading Russian-Cuban soldiers, or if they should just turn themselves in to the enemy. After the invasion, the teens go into hiding in the mountains, and it is only after sneaking back into town that they discover citizens either submitting to the enemy, or are in "re-education camps." The teens decide to fight back, and begin calling themselves the Wolverines. During their efforts of attacking the enemy, the film takes on a constant feeling of impending doom surrounding the teens' guerilla war effort. This impending doom surfaces from post-Cold War fears that question whether fighting back is even worth it. However, the lead characters Jed (Patrick Swayze) and Matt Eckert (Charlie Sheen) are intent on fighting until death. The two brothers know they are fighting a losing battle before they even engage in their last fight. They know they will die. It is only after they are killed that the rest of the Wolverines make their way for Free America. The resistance of the Wolverines ends with them rather than a continued fight for American lives. The end of the

Wolverine resistance is remembered in the ending of the film, but the lack of continued resistance from the other characters submits that post-Cold War anxieties plagued the film's expression with the notion of impending doom that no character could fully combat and overcome.

The 2012 version of *Red Dawn* provides the same characters with a response to the invaders that the earlier version denied them. One scene from the adapted *Red Dawn* in particular, delineates the shift between post-Cold War anxieties and post-9/11 anxieties. In the adaptation, Jed's death doesn't end the resistance. The 2012 version of *Red Dawn* trades in its predecessor's cynicism for patriotism. Jed's death encourages Matt (Josh Peck) and the remaining Wolverines to continue fighting for the people and land they love. Instead of despairing about his brother and giving up, Matt immediately begins to take action and dictate a retreat in order to get the communication device they stole to Free America. This moment in the film forces a consideration as to the way a reformulation of the text asks audiences to recognize the way our cultural anxieties after 9/11 altered the plot. No longer is there a feeling of impending doom for the characters. Instead, patriotism and a clear motive to fight permeate throughout the film's content. This more patriotic plot exposes how our "grids of interpretation," as Stam would say it, have changed (57). The characters no longer despair over the "imaginative" enemy and maintain a cynical approach to warfare; these teens now fear the terroristic enemy that kills at any moment and have the patriotic sense to fight back no matter how fearful they may be.

While the first two adaptations altered the plot to target current anxieties, *How I Live Now* works somewhat differently. One scene illustrates this particularly well, but it does not occur in the novel. I focus on this scene more than the rest because its absence remarks on how anxieties have altered perceived responses to war in just twenty years. The novel never places Daisy in a position to kill for her life or another's. In the novel, she just feels, sees, and observes the impending doom of war coming at her, and never really has to fight back. The novel explores the way war can be all around Daisy, but World War III never fully makes an appearance in her world. This source text threatens Daisy through "imaginative" threats that only crystallize through the fear of losing her family. It is only through Daisy's mental construction that readers truly feel pressured by the ideological battlefield that is significant within post-Cold War literature.

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The fact that the main character, Daisy (Saoirse Ronan), kills someone in the film even though she does not kill anyone in the novel highlights a change in her ability to fight back against a “non-imaginary” threat. The added scene of the film adaptation *How I Live Now* begins with Daisy and Piper (Harley Bird) resting in the woods when two men see the girls and begin to chase after them. Daisy hides Piper, but the men find the little girl and begin to make jokes about raping her. In a frenzy, Daisy emerges holding a gun she had stolen earlier. There is a moment of hesitation where it isn’t certain that fear Daisy is capable of pulling the trigger. Then, to everyone’s surprise (especially Daisy’s), she shoots him in the chest. The scene’s images and sounds become distorted as the reality of what Daisy has done sinks in for everyone. The man holding Piper is shocked and accidentally loosens his grip which enables Piper to get away. Daisy proceeds to shoot the man before he can attack either of the girls again. Both shocking and intense, this implanted scene requires Daisy to act out against a tangible enemy unlike the original version. The addition of this scene identifies that our ability to act is more relevant than an ideological stalemate. Moreover, reformulating the source text of *How I Live Now* enables audiences to navigate the plot’s cultural relevancy by appealing to immediate fears.

By drawing on immediate fears through a focus on youth culture, these films invite consideration of the way each of these adaptations encourages viewers to participate in self-evaluation. Viewers are provided with proximity to culturally relevant fears that require active reflection. These adaptations also suggest that adults are not the only ones who desire to work through post-9/11 cultural anxieties. Part of this drive to work through such fears may be due to what Marjorie Heins describes as Western nations’ depriving their teens of the “ability to confront and work through the messiness of life—the things that are gross, shocking, embarrassing, or scary” (256). She attributes teen inability to confront such messy topics to the constant policies of censorship. If this deprivation is the case, then it only makes sense that one of the most powerful mediums today would attempt to artistically employ the realities of life. Teen war flicks can function as a way for teens to break through and attempt to resolve the social problems within culture. Heins’ discussion over youth development alludes to the notion that shocking teen war films can work to ease youth culture’s “navigat[ion] of the dense and insistent media barrage that surrounds them” (257). Yet, it appears that the entertainment industry makes

space through the teen war film to confront, break down, and rise above the distance between youth culture and anxieties. Through images that provide youth culture proximity to their most current fears, films, such as the three film adaptations discussed herein, can use a familiar, older text by reshaping anxieties to better fit the world with which youth culture is familiar.

Youth culture's ability to access texts that provide ways to work through post-9/11 fears that bring forth other questions: Why do we shield such portrayals of war, and why? How does youth culture come to terms with the images they see on film for further consideration after the film ends? Heins states that such censorship hinders a youth's "access to information and ideas...precisely because they are in the process of identity formation" (258). Since youths are in the midst of understanding themselves and their cultural realities, certain aspects of culture need to be made available. Heins also argues that "exploring alternatives to censorship" does not mean giving up all censorship (262). But, she does argue that, given our "ideological arguments," there should be a place for Western civilization's youth to reflect on the realities of the world that surrounds them (262). Teen films can be viewed as an outlet which can indirectly address issues censorship may find less appealing if addressed explicitly. Perhaps, this is why the relevance of the teen war film appears to have spiked in viewer interest. The ability to "see," even if only indirectly, may be enough to at least generate discussion rather than harm.

It stands to reason that the film adaptations of *Tomorrow*, *When the War Began*, *Red Dawn*, and *How I Live Now* can fulfill the need to bypass censorship through fictional narratives. When film productions use the images on screen to confront difficult content, youths can become equipped with the material to begin piecing together the blanks within their censored maturation. Thus, it can be argued that youth culture is drawn to these teen war flicks for formative reasons. Witnessing films that address the material adults do not outright discuss with young adults (for the sake of their "sensitivities"), provides access to topics with which youths may not be familiar. Topics of death, war, rape, etc. are realities that, according to Heins, are brushed under the rug. If so, how do these youths prepare for life after "growing up?" There is no magical, instantaneous transition; there is only the gradual ascent to adulthood. The only way to do so, however, is through the slippery slope of looking beyond what youth culture has to offer in

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conjunction with cultural anxieties. In a sense, film is a way for youths to “experience” reality without ever having to take the risk—they can live vicariously through the screen in order to gather their ideological bearings and work from there.

After considering these three adaptations, it becomes more apparent how the reformulation of anxieties specific to youth culture can be a useful tool. Reformulation provides viewers with the ability to discern: (1) Audiences (most specifically, youths) are able to experience a cathartic release that reflects the ability to experience and work through anxieties, and (2) that film can provide youth culture with a medium with which to access topics they would miss out on otherwise. Off screen, these three films function as catalysts that allow viewers to fight their own internal battles vicariously through fictional events. Going back to Lacy, it makes sense to submit that these films such as the ones discussed can utilize signifiers to capture and expose the very conflicts that society constructs. The current social, political, and economic climate of developed countries feel a pressure to resolve the conflicts that create anxiety. Film can provide an avenue that allows viewers to explore their ideological bearings. Ultimately, by watching relevant ideological positions on screen, youth culture can begin to attempt to make sense of them, weigh them, and cathartically experience the possibility that these ideologies may be undermined.

These three adaptations specifically call attention to youth culture while illustrating the way three geographically distant continents focus on and reformulate cultural anxieties pertaining to 9/11 fears within a close-knit time frame. All three films appeal to cultural anxieties that are important to their countries, yet these anxieties also appear to be recognizable and relevant to other countries as well. Moreover, these anxieties focus on youth culture’s ability to override their cultural attitudes in times of war. What’s even more interesting is how and why. The internet and mass media have altered the way time and place constructs our worldview no matter the geographical location. Stam’s original assertion took place before the World Wide Web, and therefore, it took longer for such drastic alterations to occur. As it stands now, current cultures and events of one nation can be felt and heard in another nation almost instantaneously. In that case, all three films, while standing alone in their own right, can also be “read” alongside one another in order to consider why cultural anxieties have begun to reach across geographical boundaries and pinpoint teens as the

centerpiece. My consideration only spans a twenty year gap, and only in the most extreme example, but there is no longer a firm temporal or geographical regulation to viewer experience. In the event of 9/11, the traumatic event went worldwide within moments. The impact of such an event transferred to more than one place, and was received by a global audience almost instantaneously. *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, *Red Dawn*, and *How I Live Now* all bring this compression into perspective. It is useful to consider the relevance of such an occurrence especially since it positions youth culture at the forefront of this barrage of anxieties. The experiences of one can now be felt by many, and these adaptations provide a road map as to how different arenas have all questioned the post-9/11 anxieties that have overridden the post-Cold War anxieties Western culture once had.

When studying the adapted narratives of *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, *Red Dawn*, and *How I Live Now*, it becomes apparent that adaptations form themselves around the current anxieties a culture experiences. The source texts for these three films sit in post-Cold War anxieties while the adaptations focus on post-9/11 fears. These anxieties then go on to mold the youth of said culture while also calling attention to the policies that inform their growth into functioning citizens. When the policies censor particular aspects of reality, teens may begin to seek out cultural expressions that speak to the information they lack. Films work as informative tools that can aid youth culture in accessing and participating in self-evaluative activities so as to familiarize themselves of anxiety-producing topics such as terroristic attacks. In that case, the three adaptations mentioned serve as more than an adapted text that shifts between post-Cold War and post-9/11 anxieties. Rather, these adaptations put post-9/11 in conversation with youth culture so as to encourage participatory engagement of teens in the overriding process of challenging worldviews that they will someday face.

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