



Echauri-Galván, Bruno. 2023. *Polvo eres y en cine te convertirás. Valoraciones y relevancia de la fidelidad en la recepción de crítica y público de la adaptación cinematográfica de Ask the Dust.* Peter Lang. 184 pp. ISBN: 978-3034346818

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“There is much more to the story of John Fante” reads the preface Charles Bukowski (1995, 7) wrote for the 1980 reedition of *Ask the Dust* (1939), a love letter from an almost forgotten John Fante to both the city of Los Angeles (LA) and human nature. These words would lead to the revival of the Italian-American author in the global literary scene, begetting an increasing academic interest which would result in kaleidoscopic (newer) researches associated with Fante’s transatlantic legacy. And it is precisely said legacy that permeates this book. Published by Peter Lang, *Polvo eres y en cine te convertirás* (2023) becomes volume 30 of the *Critical Perspectives on English and American Literature, Communication and Culture* series. This publication by Bruno Echauri-Galván revitalises pivotal debates in the field of adaptation studies, aiming at providing a both timely and sharply focused critical study on the role of fidelity –long sidelined in academia– in the reception of film adaptations by using the case of *Ask the Dust* (2006), Robert Towne’s movie adaptation of Fante’s homonymous (now) cult novel (1939). Through a dual lens based on professional critical discourse and audience commentary, Echauri-Galván explores the extent to which the so-called original continues to shape the evaluative judgement of cinematic adaptations, resurrecting the Italian-American writer in his wake. That is, he undertakes a methodologically rigorous and analytically nuanced research on how fidelity is alluded, negotiated, and valued. Instead of only approaching ‘reception’ in aesthetic terms, he seeks to comprehend it in relation to fidelity projections –either cultural, emotional or textual.

Articulated in eight chapters, this monograph balances theoretical exposition and empirical analysis, as well as evident engagement with the literary and cultural legacy of Fante’s work. It is structured as cinematic stages, as if it were Echauri-Galván’s own Fante adaptation in book format, guiding readers through an ambitious intellectual journey. A nice metaphor for a book that plays with cinematic forms to frame academic discourse. Throughout the publication, the reader dives into theoretical foundations through context and close critical reading, as well as into paratextual analysis and empirical findings, while the text foregrounds the power of fidelity as both notion and expectation.

Beginning with Chapter 1, “Créditos de apertura”, it is inspired by the Italian-American author’s writing style to introduce an almost lyrical description of LA, which serves to submerge the reader in the pre-dirty-realist atmosphere of *Ask the Dust*. These opening credits propose to revisit the concept of ‘fidelity’, departing from the traditional comparison film-novel to examine how Robert Towne’s (dis)connection from Fante’s source text affects the (re)views of his motion picture. The premise also reassesses the value of paratexts, turned into argumentative tools, and frames *Ask the Dust* as a transnational piece of literature which must be re-discovered: “Volvamos a sus páginas, buceemos en su figura, cartografiemos su legado. Preguntémosle al polvo” [“Let’s return to his pages, delve into his figure, and map out his legacy. Let’s Ask the dust.”] (Echauri-Galván 2023, 15; my translation). In short, this brief prelude presents key concepts which help to create the conceptual map that will orient the rest of the monograph’s inquiry.

Chapter 2, entitled “El camino a Los Ángeles: biografía novelada de John Fante”, delves into the portrait of John Fante, disclosing a biography which is essential to understand his stories. Using Fante’s literary works, Echauri-Galván builds up a fictionalised memoir in which he gradually unveils the secrets of the Italian-American author while evincing Fante’s tendency to merge his life experiences with those of his characters. Following Fine (1999), the monograph depicts the literary characteristics of Fante, from the Angeleno boosterism to the importance of paternal-filial reconciliation, which would influence American dirty realists, the Beat Generation and even other writers overseas. Briefly, this second chapter underlines the visceral context behind John Fante’s powerful words, not only underscoring how his work carries certain autobiographical

intimacy that may complicate adaptation and shape interpretive stakes in film reception, but also solidifying his literary presence.

In Chapter 3, “Bandini sobre el alambre: el *Ask the Dust* de John Fante”, Echaury-Galván dissects John Fante’s cult novel, providing a close analysis of *Ask the Dust* itself. In a carefully written summary, he displays the pilgrimage of Arturo Bandini in LA. He considers the multiple thematic motifs of the book –artistic ambition, alienation, sex and gender–, alongside the image of the city as a cornerstone of Fante’s narrative, a deconstructed paradise which speaks of suffering, desires and youthful effervescence. Echaury-Galván also highlights the weight of ‘dust’ within the novel as a metaphor of the inevitable destiny: death, like dust, omnipresently surrounds everybody’s path, but it is people who must decide how to live. In the novel, however talented Bandini pictures himself, he is full of insecurities, which infer an identity dilemma that catalyses the search for fitting in and the eventual acceptance of the self, leaving dust behind (Echaury-Galván 2023). Thus, the analytic depth in this third section produces a solid depiction of once-unsuccessful Fante’s cult story which will later help to master the stakes of (in)fidelity: what will be preserved, what lost and what transformed in the film adaptation.

On the other hand, Chapter 4, “Canción triste de Bunker Hill: el *Ask the Dust* de Robert Towne”, becomes a brief close-reading account of Robert Towne’s movie. Echaury-Galván navigates the difficulties undergone in the process of developing Fante’s cinematic adaptation. He narrates the Italian-American writer’s attempts to create his own script and sale his book rights, but neither plan ever crystallised. Simultaneously, Robert Towne is described as a successful scriptwriter (and occasional director) whose first filmic approaches to Fante’s work never came to fruition. Nevertheless, the American filmmaker never ceased to try to adapt Fante’s narrative world. Then, having collected the approval (and rights) of Fante, Towne only needed studio support, which would arrive thanks to the participation of star actor Colin Farrel, later followed by Salma Hayek and Donald Sutherland. Regardless of a difficult shooting process and the scarce funding, *Ask the Dust* was ultimately released in 2006. Shortly, this chapter pays homage to the odyssey which preceded the adaptation of John Fante’s novel, potentially foretelling the fate of the movie.

In Chapter 5, “Ya en cines... antes en librerías: estudios de adaptación y debate sobre la fidelidad”, Echaury-Galván relocates his research in the broader debate which continues haunting the field of adaptation studies: the (in)fidelity argument. Beginning with the conception of intertextuality, the passage introduces Kristeva’s theory –inspired by Saussure and Bakhtin (Zengin 2016)– and its influence in the creation of Genette’s hypertextuality (1997). It is explained that these concepts are used by scholars (McFarlane 1996; Leitch 2005; Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013; Cutchins 2017) to theorise about and broaden the scope of adaptation, raising awareness on the constraints of the fidelity issue. Nonetheless, agreeing with other academics (Connor 2007; Lopate 2007; MacCabe 2011), fidelity is pictured as a rich and wide concept, susceptible to be renewed, remaining within adaptation studies. Hence, this thorough chapter procures an impeccable theoretical framework about the (dis)advantages of including fidelity in the field of adaptation, presenting a more conciliatory approach which advocates the value and integration of the concept.

After clarifying the tenets of (in)fidelity and adaptation, Chapter 6, “De paratextos y su papel en el cine”, is dedicated to paratexts, which are “all those things which we are never certain belong to the text of a work but which contribute to present – or ‘presentify’ – the text by making it into a book” (Genette 1988, 63). In other words, paratexts are elements which are associated with a particular work and would help to better understand it, such as a preface or reviews. Having meticulously explored the concept of ‘paratext’, Echaury-Galván focuses on the pre-eminence of critical response, reviews, in the ecosystem surrounding a film release and its trajectory. This task used to rest with specialised media, from newspapers to journals. However, the digital globalisation of the world has democratised the process, transforming it into a polyphony in which experts appear interweaved with *amateur* critics. Together, these voices are a vector for disseminating the film, a force that boosts (or discourages) attendance in theatres. Nevertheless, how are the concepts of ‘paratext’ and ‘fidelity’ to be connected? Concurring with scholars like MacCabe (2011) or de Zwaan (2015), Echaury-Galván exposes that adaptation reviewers tend to apply a comparativist logic caused by a prior approach to the source text, which issues a presumable superiority. That is, they use fidelity to determine whether an adaptation is worthy. In the end, this chapter shows that the connection fidelity-paratext is full of possibilities, leading to a surprising conclusion which may eventually defy (pre)established approaches.

Chapter 7, “Polvo eres y en cine te convertirás. La recepción de *Ask the Dust* y el papel de la fidelidad”, is a wide-ranging episode divided into three subsections in which the core of the publication is unrolled. The chapter then follows a traditional narrative pattern to ease the reader’s comprehension: introduction, plot, outcome. On the one hand, “7.1. Espóiler: planteamiento” establishes the research functioning, proposing a quantitative study and a qualitative analysis. Whereas the former concentrates on how many reviews cite (in) fidelity, the latter precises how the fidelity issue is employed to criticise or elevate the film or neither. On the other hand, “7.2. Pregúntale al crítico: recepción entre la crítica especializada” details professional reviewers’ polarised reference to fidelity, which is mostly used to negatively criticise the loss of Fante’s essence due to multiple reasons, from bad direction to wrong cast. Regarding “7.3. Pregúntale al público: recepción entre el espectador medio”, it shows that the general audiences are kinder than experts, showing a more experiential perspective which renders a more positive opinion. Likewise, a possible lack of familiarity with Fante’s novel seems to make (in)fidelity a more peripheric affair. Finally, “7.4. Plano general: comparación de resultados” compares the results of the previous subsections, eventually legitimising the role of fidelity in adaptation studies.

In general, the chapter unpacks the discursive pluralism of fidelity, which is used as a rhetorical resource across reviews and platforms. The analysis is illustrative, quoting expert and *amateur* reviews that come

with both paratextual quantitative patterns and qualitative insights. In addition, it supplies the reader with an appendix which includes tables and a graph that help to categorise reviewed aspects and fidelity references. Shortly, Chapter 7 exemplifies how to employ an empirical approach to address a theoretical question. Instead of arguing whether (in)fidelity matters, it shows how it remains of substance. In this sense, not only does the monograph advance in terms of adaptation theory, but it also contributes to broadening debates related to cultural and reception studies.

To conclude, Chapter 8, “Créditos finales: conclusiones”, becomes Echaury-Galván’s last cinematic stage, his end credits. Rather than crudely composing a reductive summary of previous sections, this last chapter offers a deep and reflective conclusion which keeps the stylistic fluency and sharpness observed in previous passages. Echaury-Galván’s writing proves his awareness that academic contributions should not be isolated scholarly verdicts but a part of a wider dialogue. Moreover, the chapter ponders on the role and future directions of (in)fidelity, returning to key findings and avoiding any type of overstatement. It also strengthens the idea that fidelity, however academically discredited, should remain a powerful tool for both critics and audiences, a phenomenon to be decoded and understood within adaptation studies. In the end, the section does not answer what makes adaptations faithful but leaves the question open, reflecting that adapted texts are complex works shaped by culture, emotions and assumptions –elements the author considers worthy of analysis in their own right. Ultimately, Echaury-Galván shouts what has already been hinted throughout the book: this monograph is as much about adaptation and reception as it is about John Fante. Like Bukowski’s preface once was, this is the scholar’s own love letter to the Italian-American author, paving the way for future research on the writer and his cult (though almost forgotten) work.

In conclusion, Echaury-Galván’s *Polvo eres y en cine te convertirás* proposes a strong model of interdisciplinary research, cultural awareness and methodological sophistication, that is characterised by its theoretical clarity, contextual richness and empirical precision. This monograph should be considered a contemporary landmark in both adaptation and reception studies (and studies on Fante). It is a breath of new life into (in)fidelity discourse where fidelity is neither nostalgically defended nor dogmatically dismissed, but it is introduced as a (for the time being) everlasting and multifaceted tool. In sum, *Polvo eres y en cine te convertirás* does not only deepen the understanding of adaptation but refreshes and (slightly) reorients an already mature field.

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