

Article

A Real Witcher—Slavic or Universal; from a Book, a Game or a TV Series? In the Circle of Multimedia Adaptations of a Fantasy Series of Novels “The Witcher” by A. Sapkowski

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Abstract: A series of novels about a witcher, written by Andrzej Sapkowski almost thirty years ago, has now become an inspiration for the creation of mass productions of mainstream popular culture—film and multimedia adaptations for use in computer games. It is one of the few examples of global messages of mass culture being based on Polish creativity. The recognition of “The Witcher”, due to the Netflix production, soon contributed to building the national pride of Polish people, and at the same time sparked a discussion in Central and Eastern European countries on the consequences of the multimedia adaptation of Andrzej Sapkowski’s prose. Questions about the dissonance between the Slavic and universal dimensions of “The Witcher” in relation to the original novels and their adaptations are a part of the traditional discourse on the adaptability of literature and its consequences for the reception by the audience. This article tries to capture the specific character of the adaptations of Andrzej Sapkowski’s literature from the point of view of typology, known from the literature of the subject, as well as to answer the question about the consequences of the discrepancy between the original book and its adaptations in the form of a film, a TV series, and computer games. The considerations in the article were based on the literature analysis and the research based on the existing sources.

Keywords: media; mass culture; adaptation; film; digital games

1. Introduction

Numerous adaptation theorists and practitioners refer to the words that Stanley Kubrick allegedly spoke during the production of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)—“If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed”. Adaptation theories try to answer the question of how this phenomena happens; they try to create a typology of ways of translating the written word into the language of a film or new media, and finally, they try to predict how these forms of adaptation will be perceived by the audience. Transposing a literary work into the language of the stage, a film, or a computer game encounters numerous problems and dilemmas and is often exposed to criticism from both the creators and the audience. One of the basic distinctions in the characteristics of each work created for the purposes of audio-visual arts is the division into the original and the adapted scenario. Adaptation—everywhere in the world—is one of the basic ways of obtaining valuable literary material for cinema (Jenkins 2006).

The literature on the subject, dealing with the issue of the relationship between the novel and the film, often assumes that the basis of their relationship is the observation that in both cases, we deal with narrative arts. Their essence is storytelling, which cannot be, and is not, the domain of just one communication system. In literature, we can find numerous model proposals for the

implementation of adaptations, among which the concepts of Geoffrey Wagner (transposition, comment, analogy) (Wagner 1975), Michael Klein and Gillian Parker (deconstruction, interpretation, autonomy) (Helman 1998), and Dudley Andrew (crossing, borrowing, transformation) (Andrew 1984) are worthy of attention. Brian McFarlane, on the other hand, tries to study the process of transposing a literary text into a film to determine the type of relationship between both of them. Therefore, she is looking for theoretical rigors that allow analysts to go beyond impressionistic and subjective comparisons, so often dominant in adaptation studies. McFarlane argues that when considering the issue of adaptation, the central features of it should have the story, which constitutes the fundamental bond between literature and film—and the story is precisely what is the actual subject of the adaptation (McFarlane 1996).

In the methodological approach to adaptation research in Europe, structural and semiotic studies seem to prevail. Adaptation is analyzed in terms of the equivalence of signs in translation, described by the concept of transformation, transposition, transcription, or intersemiotic translation (Wyslouch 2014). In approaches that avoided unequivocal support for the sign theory, the adaptation process was treated as a kind of “synthesis” or “aesthetic osmosis” (Choczaj 2011). The semiotic perspective, in which both literature and film should be considered, implies treating the film adaptation of a literary work as an intersemiotic translation, which translates the meanings of a message formulated in one semiotic system. Thus, the selection of the most appropriate signs from another sign system and the most appropriate combination of them is created to obtain a message with meanings consistent with the meanings of the translated message (Czyżyk 1975).

Regardless of terminological differences, research on adaptation is clearly dominated by the literary approach (Helman 1998), in which a literary work is perceived as an “original” and a film is an art form that depends entirely on a literary work. The opposite point of view negates this attitude, considering the film to be the result of a fully autonomous creative process. Adapting the literary form and content to the style of a film does not in any way reduce the value of adaptation. In terms of matter, the film has nothing to do with literature. The plot, and therefore the material, determines the form (Balázs 1987). Literature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form. However, this hierarchy also involves what can be called iconophobia (a suspicion of the visual) and logophilia (love of the word as sacred) (Stam 2000).

Moreover, what seems to be the most important for further consideration is the fact that the described phenomena of adaptation has the character of an ontological transformation, i.e., such a transformation of the original work that results in the necessity to adopt a new theory of its existence (Winiecka 2017). It is a transformation that interferes with the character of each dimension of the work, according to the findings of the authors who have been quoted here: on the semiotic, technological, and cultural levels and on the “translator’s intervention and interference” (Szczesna et al. 2004). It also concerns the construction of the work, but most of all the way it exists and is present, as well as the way of accessing it and the possibility for the recipient to interact with it.

The digital adaptations of “The Witcher” or “The Hexer” discussed in this article have an intermedia character. The media dimension of literature, the properties of which combine communication technology with a system of socio-cultural practices, is a starting point for the reflection on the status and metamorphosis of literariness, freed from the traditional linear structure of the printed volume and transferred to the digital environment (Hendrykowski 2013). The susceptibility of works of literature to intermedia translation also results from the technological ease of transforming objects. Once digitized, a piece of work is permanently included in the circulation of culture; it can circulate in it in the form of quotations, transformations, and comments, but also in the form of various motifs and plots, influencing the collective imagination. According to E. Winiecka, it is only a step away from adaptation, which not only recreates the content and codes used in a changed medium, but radically rebuilds and creates a digital work from scratch (Winiecka 2017). Thanks to a digital adaptation, literature becomes a new, multi- and inter-media being (Higgins 2000), transformed in the environment

of digital technologies. As part of this transformation, the recipient's experience is shaped not only by the interpretation of meanings, but by the overall audio-visual experience.

2. Thirty Years of "The Witcher"

"The Witcher" was created by Andrzej Sapkowski—a Polish fantasy writer who has been working since the 1980s. The saga of Geralt of Rivia—the witcher, consisting of three volumes of short stories and a five volume novel—brought Sapkowski popularity first in Poland, then in Slavic countries. Due to the Netflix production and computer games, it gained an international dimension. The witcher is a fictional character, without a historical prototype, but having significant connections with many fantasy heroes. The witcher is a warrior, a loner, a mysterious figure, with a specific code of honor derived from belonging to a brotherhood. He is an eccentric, well-trained in martial arts; he deals with killing monsters that threaten the security of the human world. The elimination of the bloodthirsty creations, however, is not his missionary activity, but rather a kind of service provided by the witcher for money.

In the world created by Sapkowski, the witchers are almost always boys, trained from an early age in martial arts. Their bodies undergo far-reaching genetic transformations because of magical elixirs. The purpose of these procedures is to prepare the witchers for an effective fight with monsters. Thanks to these, they gain sharpened senses, faster reflexes, and endurance. The side effects of the witcher's training are numerous, namely infertility, frequent face disfigurements, and the loss of body pigment, leading to albinism. The witcher can use residual magic, but it is not his main skill. Thus, the features of the witcher belong to the canon known from fantasy novels (Trebbicki 2007; Mendlesohn 2008), combining the hero's positive traits of character aimed at protecting the world of people from dark monsters. At the same time, the witcher's code of conduct is based on a guild code, which is ambiguous and assumes the avoidance of responsibility in morally ambiguous situations. However, the witcher is not an explicit and simple character.

The Saga of "The Witcher" is a series of novels by Andrzej Sapkowski, consisting of five novels and a continuation of the author's early stories, published in the 1980s. The series includes the novels: "Blood of Elves" (1994), "Time of Contempt" (1995), "Baptism of Fire" (1996), "The Tower of the Swallow" (1997), and "The Lady of the Lake" (1999).

They are a continuation of the stories known from Sapkowski's earlier writing, which appeared in magazines and then collected in the volumes: "The Witcher" (1990), "Sword of Destiny" (1992), and "The Last Wish" (1993). The series of stories about the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, started the short story "The Witcher", which was published in the Polish monthly "Fantastyka" in December 1986.

Andrzej Sapkowski is reluctant to describe his work as a saga because, as he claims, this is a concept reserved for Norse mythology. He uses the term "cycle" much more willingly (Beres and Sapkowski 2005).

Although Andrzej Sapkowski's work has already been published in almost 30 countries around the world, for obvious reasons, it is the most popular in Poland. Apart from the reasons related to the author's nationality, one of the key factors influencing the admiration of the witcher is his alleged Slavic character. There is an ongoing dispute among the faithful admirers of Sapkowski's work about the Slavic origins of the protagonist, Geralt of Rivia. This dispute has been going on for twenty years, but its apogee has recently been observed, since "The Witcher" ceased to be an exclusively Polish (Slavic) cultural product and entered the mainstream global mass culture. This is possible not only because of the translations of Sapkowski's books into other languages, but due to multimedia adaptations of "The Witcher".

The adaptations of The Witcher, aimed at popularizing it within mass culture, began in the 1990s. In the period 1993–1995, comic books including drawings by Bogusław Polch and a script written by Sapkowski appeared on the Polish publishing market. However, they did not achieve much publicity and became rather a rarity for novelists. "The Witcher" gained much more publicity because of its film productions. By the end of the 1990s, an idea to adapt the short story "The Witcher" into a film

appeared in Poland, but the works got stuck at the stage of writing the script. The first film adaptation of “The Witcher” took place in 2001. The movie was created as an additional result of work on a television series with the same title, which premiered in 2002. The first adaptation did not have many followers and generally did not appeal to the fans of Sapkowski’s prose, or to viewers who had no previous experience with “The Witcher”. The box office of this movie was so small that the revenues from the film covered only half of its production costs. The film was made in an atmosphere of scandals and numerous problems.

A few days before the premiere, Michał Szczerbic, a screenwriter for the film, withdrew from the project and did not agree to include his name in the credits. The reason was that the creators allegedly changed his script too much. The Witcher was therefore a film that did not officially mention the screenwriter’s name. During the filming, the team faced opposition from fans of Andrzej Sapkowski’s work, who founded the “Committee for Defence of the Only Right Image of the Witcher”. A protest against the main roles cast and departing from the spirit of the original in the plot was announced on their website. For obvious reasons, the 13 episode series also did not appeal to the audience. It was a mere development of the film, reproducing numerous errors and shortcomings of production.

The beginning of the international career of “The Witcher” dates back to 2007. It was then that the first computer game made by CD Projekt was launched ([Garda 2010](#)).

The budget of the game was about PLN 19 million, and its release was accompanied by a huge promotional campaign. After its release, “The Witcher” received praise from critics for its storyline, audio-visual setting, and fighting system. The disadvantages of the production of the Polish studio were the excessive sexualization of women and numerous technical errors, most of the latter being improved by the Extended Edition released in September 2008, which also includes new adventures for the player.

The significant commercial success of The Witcher (nearly two million copies had been sold by June 2011) attracted the attention of the nationwide press. In 2011, CD Projekt RED produced a sequel, “The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings”, while in 2015, the third instalment of the series, closing the trilogy, was released, entitled “The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt” ([Krzyscin 2015](#); [Janski 2016](#)). “The Witcher 2” was developed for PC and the Xbox 360 console, while the third part of the game, apart from the PC version, was also released for Xbox One and PlayStation 4. Additionally, in 2019, the game was launched on Nintendo Switch.

Undoubtedly, the most important event related to the popularization of the story about the witcher was the premiere of the American-Polish series created by Lauren S. Hissrich based on A. Sapkowski’s books about the witcher Geralt. This was a consequence of the announcement of the Netflix platform in May 2017, when the production of the English-language series was announced ([Barragan and Barbosa 2017](#)). It has been decided that the first season will consist of eight episodes and will be filmed in Central Europe. Among Polish fans of A. Sapkowski’s work, it was a kind of confirmation of the obvious fact that The Witcher and his world are, in fact, the world of Slavic Central and Eastern Europe. In 2017, it was announced that Andrzej Sapkowski would be a creative consultant for the producers of the series, but in January 2018, he himself denied that he would have a real part in the production of the series.

3. Controversy of Adaptation

Recent intermedia adaptations of “The Witcher” are difficult to define in the context of their level of accordance with the novels. When it comes to the latest production, which is the Netflix series, even the Polish embassy in the U.S. on its Facebook profile posted a message claiming that it is an adaptation of a popular computer game, not Andrzej Sapkowski’s novels. Vigilant observers and fans of Andrzej Sapkowski’s work quickly drew the embassy’s attention, demanding that the writer be returned to honor and admitted that he had created the figure of Geralt of Rivia. Diplomats corrected the mistake, but the history of editing the entry shows what mistakes had been committed by the embassy.

Andrzej Sapkowski, in his interviews, has repeatedly mentioned the ambivalence of his judgments related to games that were based on his prose. From a marketing point of view, it might seem that the success of the games based on the literature may translate into the success of the literature, but the author's opinion is different. In one of the interviews, Sapkowski directly stated that "The publicity and sales results speak for themselves, if it were a weak game; it would not have had such achievements. But working on my own success, it has to admitted that the game had a negative effect on my books. Several publishers have included the images from games on the covers of my books. So many readers classified the books as the so-called game related, i.e., written for the game. There are a lot of such books on the SF&F market. Seeing a picture of a game on the cover of my book, many fans assumed that the game was created first. And serious SF and fantasy fans despise such secondary books and do not buy them, because—primo—they are secondary and not original. Secundo—they are completely irrelevant to those who do not play any games—and they constitute the vast majority of fans" (Zwierzychowski 2020).

Perhaps this skepticism results from the fact that Sapkowski has a rather difficult relationship with the form of CD Projekt (the creator of the game "The Witcher"). He sold the rights to the "witcher" very cheaply. Not believing in the success of the game, he collected a fee on a one-off basis, instead of a share in the profits. Analyzing the mechanisms of the fate of the adaptation of "The Witcher" into the popular computer game, it is difficult not to notice the conflict between the book and the game. The proportions were to some extent upset, and the genres based on the novel came to the fore, hiding the original. On the one hand, there is a symbiosis in the relationship between the original and the adapted work, in the form that the game took advantage of the popularity of the books, and at the same time, the literature gained a second wave of popularity due to the popularity of the game.

On the other hand, Sapkowski's words that "with the eyes of his soul he sees more readers reaching for the game than players reaching for books" (Zwierzychowski 2020) are puzzling themselves in their meaning.

Undoubtedly, the greatest publicity for "The Witcher" and Andrzej Sapkowski was brought by the screening prepared by Netflix, which premiered on 20 December 2019. The carrying capacity of the film platform meant that "The Witcher" became an even stronger element of pop culture, on a global scale. However, the question arises whether, thanks to the series and the publicity it gained, the "The Witcher" by Andrzej Sapkowski actually reached the multi-million audience, or whether it was an attractive adaptation, which in fact does not have much in common with the original. The answer to such a question is ambiguous.

On the one hand, the adaptation seems to be true to its original in many respects. Above all, it perfectly reflects the character of the main character that fights for survival in a world that hates him and stubbornly adheres to the moral code developed by his guild, which forces him to make dangerous decisions. The witcher is rough and sarcastic, always ready to fight, but on the other hand, charming and enchanting. It is also one of the reasons for the success of "The Witcher", which has proven itself in books and video games.

Netflix's "The Witcher" differs from most fantasy fictional stories. It contains elements of a truly epic story in which, in addition to the dominating story of the main plot, the viewer receives side plots known from the literature. The viewer follows three stories, which, of course, interpenetrate each other. The individual episodes are by no means a faithful adaptation of the books, which is probably a major problem for fans of Andrzej Sapkowski's prose. However, players will also not find a recreation of the game scenario under the "The Witcher" brand in the series.

Netflix proposed a hybrid solution, referring largely to both the original novels and computer games, and at the same time, created a production in many places significantly different from the original(s). The series is sometimes more demanding on the part of the viewers than simple entertainment cinema. Events are not always presented in chronological order, and there is no clear indication of whether past or present events are represented. This, however, reflects the disturbing and intricate nature of Andrzej Sapkowski's prose.

Netflix's "The Witcher" is an adaptation based on numerous deviations from the original. Even before its premiere, during production, Andrzej Sapkowski commented that it was the full right of the creators of the series to modify the film and that he did not expect the stories he had created to be recreated in detail, but rather that they would be appropriately adapted to the medium of the TV series. Consequently, the creators of the series explained to the fans of "The Witcher" that the differences between Sapkowski's prose and the TV series are dictated by the need to make the story more consistent and introduce heroes who are bound to play important roles in the future. The "The Witcher" series seems to meet the expectations of both those fans who expect the most faithful adaptation possible, focusing on recreating the smallest details, and those who expect a looser interpretation and different presentation of the plot compared to the original novel.

What, therefore, within the controversy, deserves praise, and what raises reservations? Of course, the answer to such a question is highly subjective, but reading the reviews and viewers' opinions, a very good presentation of the battle scenes can be highlighted. They fully reflect, and perhaps with some excess, the effects of Andrzej Sapkowski's above-average ability to describe battle scenes. It seems that the series also owes its uniqueness to its specific atmosphere, a certain halo of mystery that accompanies it. The story is a bit dark and emotional and engages the viewer, just like the original novel. The series also reflects a good sense of humor, woven into the story by Sapkowski, which releases emotions at certain moments. The pace of the series relates directly to the author's literary narrative.

Among many critics, however, there are opinions that "The Witcher" is a solid, correct, and at the same time, a simply bland series. Especially for orthodox fans of Sapkowski's prose, the series appears to be a perfectly average production, stripping the plot and image of everything that is important and unique about the witcher in the books. Critics of this adaptation point to the fact that the place of colorful, plastic, and imaginatively creative descriptions is replaced by average frames. Moreover, the wonderfully written dialogues have been shortened and devoid of the stylized language that Sapkowski gave his characters originally. There is no subtlety of commentary on contemporary events that can be found in his books, and Sapkowski's playful humor in the series can be crude. The different assessments of the level and quality of the adaptation of "The Witcher" confirm a certain ambiguity and the lack of clear evaluation criteria, and at the same time, there is evidence of the creative dimension of adaptation, living its own life, constituting a separate work.

On the one hand, the adaptations of "The Witcher" (both television and those in the form of computer games) are structurally, semantically, and artistically independent objects and do not require recalling the context of the original. On the other hand, an adaptation is always a testimony to reading another work. Comparing it with the prototype is the basic mode of reception, which allows understanding the intertextual, intersemiotic, and intermedia nature of the adaptation. Therefore, dealing with digital adaptations of literature consists of a specific multiplication and complexity of the transmitting-receiving levels (Helman 2010). From this perspective, the digital adaptation of literary works raises intriguing questions about the presence, role, and significance of traditional literature as a medium in projects that often significantly change the original character and structure of the source work. Adaptations of literature are a special case of multi-system translation (Hendrykowski 2013), aimed at reinterpretation and restructuring and making it easier for recipients of works whose literariness (functionality, added order, imagery, and multi-interpretability) is a kind of a translation task.

One of the most expressive conflicts about the multimedia adaptations of "The Witcher" that can be seen among Polish critics and audiences is the dispute about the Slavic nature of both Geralt of Rivia and the entire series, and consequently, its adaptations.

4. The Slavic Character of the Adaptation of “The Witcher”

The Slavic nature of “The Witcher” turns out to be “scalable”. While in books, many of its determinants can easily be found and in games, a little less (Jagosz 2016), in the Netflix series, this Slavic character almost completely disappears. This change of character is one of the important elements of the practical sphere of adaptability of literature to intermediality. “The Witcher” certainly draws from Slavic mythology as it can be found in many names of monsters derived from Slavic tales and myths. It contains references to Polish legends and even Polish history.

The significant fact is that the prototype is a Polish series of books, written by a Polish author. Sapkowski, however, created a highly eclectic work. It combines various elements of different mythologies, using stories from different parts of the world and creating a separate “witcher” world. Geralt fights both with a “strzyga” (a usually female demon somewhat similar to a vampire in Slavic and especially Polish folklore, both in its name and a prototype based on Polish legends) (Mironova 2019) and a genie (which has nothing to do with Slavism).

The world of “The Witcher” definitely does not pose anything real. There is a clear literary creation in it, not reflected either in the Slavic lands or any other. In his novels, Sapkowski combines elements that do not always fit. In this eclectic world, we are dealing with the Middle Ages, but at times, the world is also very contemporary. This combination of sometimes surprising and potentially mismatched elements becomes an opportunity for an intertextual game with the reader (Iser 1995). Sapkowski—the writer—is not particularly interested in the geography of stories, the characters’ languages, or maintaining realism. It is a kind of patchwork in which social relations become key factors.

Why is the peculiar anticipation of the Slavic character of “The Witcher” among its audience present? To some extent, the reason is the adaptation of the novel in the form of computer games. It is difficult to use real data, but it can be assumed that more people played “The Witcher” than read the books. In computer games based on Sapkowski’s prose, the Slavic character is quite clear. Flags, emblems, and coats of arms seem to be similar to Poles and other Slavic nations. The place names sound familiar to Slavic people, and the in-game landscapes are very “Eastern European”. As a result, the adaptation for the needs of computer games blurs the source material of the game, making it indefinable, or the original literary work is unknown to the players and therefore becomes unverifiable.

The Polish and Slavic character of “The Witcher”, which to some extent has to do with a sense of national pride (and an element of Polish national branding) (Cawronski 2012), combined with the success of the international promotion of the Polish work is often emphasized by Polish people. However, this does not change the fact that the expectation of a closer similarity between the series “The Witcher” and that of a computer game is pointless when it comes to at least partial accordance with the original novel.

The dispute over the Slavic nature of “The Witcher” is incomprehensible and probably imperceptible from the point of view of international audiences. Nevertheless, it is an interesting example of a real problem arising from the intertextual differentiation of the adaptation of a specific literary work. This Slavic character of “The Witcher” was questioned by the author himself, explaining that it was a fantasy novel with a classic and canonical character, without any nationality.

Referring to the adaptations of his work, Andrzej Sapkowski categorically distanced himself from the relationship between the original and its adaptations. In one of the interviews, he stated: “There is an original novel and there are its adaptations to other media. With a strong emphasis on “other”. As Rudyard Kipling said, “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” You cannot put a book and its adaptations on the same level; you cannot look for relationships between them, because there are no such relationships. There are no points of contact. To be clear: I do not depreciate adaptations and other media completely, I agree that they are a challenge—if not equal to writing a book, then quite big and worthy of recognition. However, they are still something different (Szymborska and Czyz 2020).

Different adaptations of the original “The Witcher”, known from literature, undoubtedly deformed the perception of readers and changed the author’s intention. Nevertheless, it was due to them that “The Witcher” ceased to be recognizable only in Poland and other Slavic countries. It is thanks to the adaptations that it has become an international product of mass culture. Thus, the intertextuality of forms generated an ambivalent and ambiguous set of positive and negative consequences, varied in the areas to which they are assigned. Media adaptations of original works begin to live their own lives, and with time, these adaptations seem to be the only, unique, and semi-primary sources for the next generations of the recipients of cultural messages.

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