

## ***THE POWER BY NAOMI ALDERMAN: ADAPTATION THEORY IN FILM STUDIES***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines Amazon Prime Video's 2023 television adaptation of Naomi Alderman's *The Power* and the novel 2016, a speculative narrative in which women develop the ability to generate electrical shocks, thereby disrupting established gender hierarchies. Using comparative textual analysis grounded in film adaptation theory, this study investigates how the transition from novel to screen reshapes gender discourse through narrative structure, visual representation, and character development. An analysis of *The Power* using Thomas Leitch's framework from 'Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory' (2007) reveals the enduring significance of his critique twenty years later. Both novel and adaptation are examined through four critical lenses: Fidelity, Medium Specificity, Authorial Intent, and Reader Response. The fidelity discourse interrogates assumptions about textual hierarchy and evaluative criteria beyond surface-level correspondence. Medium specificity analysis recognises television's distinct affordances, episodic pacing, visual storytelling, and ensemble casting, as generative rather than limiting factors. Authorial intent becomes complicated in self-adaptation, where the creator's dual roles as novelist and showrunner reveal transformation rather than translation. Reader-response perspectives acknowledge that audiences engage differently with serialized visual narratives than with printed texts, producing distinct interpretive communities. Together, these frameworks enrich adaptation as a complex intertextual practice rather than derivative reproduction, challenging traditional notions of textual primacy.

**Keywords:** Film Adaptation Theory, Gender Studies, Feminist Television, *The Power*, Naomi Alderman, Speculative Fiction, Medium Specificity.

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### **Introduction**

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016) presents a world restructured when teenage girls suddenly develop the biological ability to release electrical energy from their bodies. This speculative premise serves as a thought experiment that examines gender, violence, and social organisation, generating significant critical discourse on its feminist implications (Siddiqui 2020).

In 2023, Amazon Prime released a television adaptation developed by Alderman herself, bringing this gender-focused speculative narrative to a visual medium. The adaptation arrived at a distinct cultural moment. Although the novel was published in 2016, the intervening years saw the rise of the #MeToo movement. It increased visibility of transgender rights, global reckonings with

gendered violence, and shifting conversations about power and patriarchy. These contextual changes shaped both the adaptation's creative choices and its reception.

The transition from novel to screen transforms narrative content in ways that adaptation theory reveals as ideologically significant rather than merely technical (Hutcheon 2012). When a narrative centres explicitly on gender and power, adaptive choices become sites of feminist intervention, negotiation, and, at times, contradiction (Elliott 2011). This study asks: How do medium-specific choices in adapting *The Power* reshape its feminist discourse, and what do these transformations reveal about the gendered nature of adaptation itself?

This research contributes to adaptation studies by providing a detailed case study of how explicitly feminist narratives transform across media. It thereby advances theoretical understanding of the relationship between medium specificity and ideological content, particularly with respect to gender representation (Hutcheon 2012). The study offers practical insights for creators adapting feminist literature, highlighting how formal choices produce political meanings. It contributes to scholarly conversations concerning speculative fiction as a feminist intervention and the role of popular media in circulating feminist ideas (Haraway 1991).

### **Relevance of Study**

The research paper is relevant for adapters; feminist adaptation requires attention beyond including women or female perspectives. It demands consideration of how formal strategies and industrial contexts shape gendered meanings produced through medium-specific choices. Content alone is insufficient; structural elements must advance feminist goals. For scholars, analysing adaptations requires accounting for multiple dimensions simultaneously: textual fidelity, differences in medium, cultural contexts, industrial pressures, and ideological positioning. In feminist cultural production, the study reveals both the possibilities and the limits of commercial feminist media. The mainstream platforms enable broad distribution but impose constraints.

### **Objectives**

The objectives provide a clear roadmap for investigating how adaptation functions as both a textual and cultural practice. It actively shapes contemporary gender discourse through its formal and ideological choices. The following are the research objectives ;

1. To analyse the cultural interventionist role of adaptations by examining how contemporary adaptations function not merely as translations of source texts, but as active participants in ongoing cultural conversations and contemporary debates.
2. To investigate the impact of narrative and structural modifications on gender politics by analysing how specific adaptation strategies, including timeline compression, character focus shifts, and plot modifications, transform and recontextualise the gender dynamics of the source material.
3. To examine the gendered dimensions of visual representation in adaptation by exploring how choices regarding the spectacle of women's power, body representation, and the relationship to the cinematic gaze produce gendered meanings and ideological implications.
4. To assess the adaptation's engagement with contemporary gender discourse by analysing how the text navigates current debates surrounding transgender inclusion and intersectional feminism, and how these negotiations reflect broader cultural tensions.
5. To contribute to theoretical frameworks of gendered adaptation practices by examining how medium-specific choices produce ideological meanings within feminist adaptation theory.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Thomas Leitch's critical examination of fundamental assumptions in 'Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,' which systematically dismantles the dominant paradigms that have constrained scholarly inquiry in this field. The research identifies several theories, including Fidelity, Medium Specificity, Authorial Intent, and Reader Response, that challenge the teleological view that adaptations exist merely to serve their sources. The essentialist notion that certain narratives are inherently bound to media, and the failure to recognise that many canonical texts were themselves adaptations of earlier materials. This theoretical reorientation enables scholars to move beyond evaluative hierarchies and toward analytical frameworks. It accounts for the complexities of intermedial translation, the agency of adapters, the expectations of different audiences, and the ways adaptations participate in ongoing processes of cultural meaning-making across time and media.

Feminist criticism strengthens this framework by demonstrating how we value stories. Often, people believe the original book is more important than the movie or play based on it. Because men wrote many famous original texts, this creates a system that favours masculine authority.

It also demonstrates how adaptations can serve as sites of feminist revision that challenge the gender ideologies embedded in canonical sources, recover marginalized female voices, and reimagine narrative possibilities for women characters constrained by patriarchal plots.

By combining Leitch's media critique with a feminist lens, scholars can move beyond the fidelity trap and focus on the complex power dynamics involved in adapting stories across media. This approach highlights the creative agency of adapters, especially women, whose transformative work has often been dismissed as secondary to a masculine original (Leitch, 2007). Ultimately, it reveals how adaptations serve as tools of feminist resistance, enabling audiences and creators to challenge patriarchal narratives and construct new cultural meanings.

### **Methodology**

The research is a qualitative study that employs comparative textual analysis as its primary method. The data consist of Alderman's novel *The Power* (2016), and all nine episodes of the Amazon Prime series (2023), published critical reviews, scholarly articles on adaptation and gender, and contextual materials, including interviews with creators and promotional materials.

The analytical process involved five stages:

- (1) Close reading through multiple viewings of both texts
- (2) Systematic comparative analysis identifying moments of fidelity, transformation, addition, and omission
- (3) Visual analysis of cinematography, editing, production design, and performance
- (4) Theoretical application of adaptation and feminist frameworks
- (5) Integrating findings to develop arguments about the intersection of medium and gender.

### **Review of Literature**

**Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. Johns Hopkins Press, 1957.**

Early adaptation criticism emphasized fidelity to the source material, with Bluestone establishing a foundational comparative analysis while recognizing differences across media. However, fidelity criticism has been widely criticized for privileging literature over film and for obscuring the creative dimensions of adaptation.

**Hutcheon, Linda.** *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.

Hutcheon revolutionized the field by conceptualizing adaptation as a palimpsest, a layered text where previous versions remain visible while new meanings emerge. She argues that adaptations should be understood and appreciated for their transformative interpretation rather than judged against an original.

**Stam, Robert.** *Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation*. *Film and Content*, edited by James Naremore, Rutgers UP, 2000, pp. 54–76.

Stam similarly critiques fidelity discourse, proposing intertextual analysis that recognizes all texts exist in dialogic relationships with multiple predecessors, sources, and cultural contexts.

**McFarlane, Brian.** *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Clarendon Press, 1996.

McFarlane distinguishes transfer from adaptation proper, noting that while some elements are movable between media, others require medium-specific transformation.

**Chatman, Seymour.** *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell UP, 1978.

Chatman's narrative theory holds that while story (content) may remain relatively stable, discourse (presentation) necessarily varies across media.

**Cartmell, Deborah, and Imelda Whelehan.** *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

This work specifically addresses gender in adaptation, arguing that adaptation is never a neutral choice; what to adapt, how to adapt it, and who performs the adaptation are all gendered.

**Whelehan, Imelda.** *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'*. New York UP, 1995.

Whelehan's research reveals tensions between literary feminism and commercial media demands, noting that adaptations of feminist texts often either domesticate radical content to appeal to mainstream audiences or radicalize texts by making implicit gender critique explicit.

**Mulvey, Laura.** *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.

Established foundational concepts for analysing gendered looks in film, arguing that classical Hollywood cinema positions viewers in a "male gaze" where women appear as objects of erotic spectacle.

**Doane, Mary Ann.** *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*. Indiana UP, 1987.

Subsequent feminist film theory has complicated Mulvey's concept, with Doane examining the female spectator and the complexities of women's relationship to the screen.

**De Lauretis, Teresa.** *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Indiana UP, 1984.

De Lauretis argues that cinema should be understood as a technology of gender that actively produces gender categories rather than simply representing pre-existing ones.

**Butler, Judith.** *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Theorizes gender as performative, constituted through repeated bodily acts rather than as the expression of pre-existing identity. This framework has profound implications for how actors' embodied performances create meaning through re-embodiment.

**Haraway, Donna.** *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Establishes speculative fiction's capacity for feminist world-building. By imagining alternative social organizations, speculative fiction denaturalizes contemporary gender arrangements.

**LeFanu, Sarah.** *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction.* Women's Press, 1988.

Analyses how feminist SF uses genre conventions to critique patriarchy through world-building, estrangement, and speculation.

**Moylan, Tom.** *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia.* Westview Press, 2000.

His concept of critical dystopia describes texts that maintain utopian hope within dystopian premises. The Power participates in this by questioning whether a changed distribution of power alters the fundamental corruption of power.

**Halberstam, Jack.** *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.* New York UP, 2005.

Provides frameworks for moving beyond tokenistic inclusion toward narratives that meaningfully engage with trans experiences.

**Keegan, Cael M.** *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender.* U of Illinois P, 2018.

Contributes to trans media studies by analysing how media can challenge CIS normative assumptions through formal and narrative choices.

**Serano, Julia.** *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity.* Seal Press, 2007.

Challenges biological essentialism in feminism, critiquing the assumption that womanhood derives from specific biological characteristics—a critique directly relevant to The Power's original premise.

### **Research Gap**

This study's textual focus, along with the absence of extensive audience-reception research, means that actual viewer interpretations may differ significantly from scholarly readings. As a single case study, it cannot claim broader patterns without comparative research across multiple adaptations. All analyses reflect the researcher's positionality; different analytical perspectives, particularly from transgender scholars, scholars of colour, and international scholars, might emphasise different dimensions and reach alternative conclusions.

### **Discussion**

This discussion demonstrates that Thomas Leitch's critique of adaptation fallacies provides a robust framework for analysing *The Power* and its television adaptation. Both novel and television series offer valuable interpretations of their shared speculative premise, and privileging one over the other obscures the distinct contributions each makes to ongoing conversations about gender, power, and social transformation.

### **Challenging the Fidelity Paradigm: Temporal Compression and Narrative Scope**

The application of Leitch's fidelity fallacy to *The Power* reveals the limitations of privileging textual faithfulness as the primary evaluative criterion for adaptations. Leitch (2003) argues that fidelity criticism fundamentally misunderstands the nature of adaptation, treating it as translation rather than reproduction. This approach continues to dominate both popular and scholarly discourse. The transformation of Alderman's multi-millennial narrative into a more temporally contained television series exemplifies the necessity of such infidelity. Alderman's novel operates across vast temporal distances, employing a framing device in which the entire narrative is presented as a historical manuscript authored by Neil Adam Armon and addressed to "Naomi" in

a future matriarchal society. This epistolary structure creates layers of ironic distance and allows readers to contemplate power reversals from both contemporary and future perspectives. The television adaptation eliminates this framing, presenting events in a straightforward chronological sequence that emphasises immediacy over philosophical contemplation. Rather than representing a diminishment of the source material, this structural transformation reflects what Leitch identifies as medium-specific demands. The serialized nature of television requires sustained dramatic tension across episodic units, necessitating narrative compression and the elimination of temporal jumps that may disrupt viewer engagement. The loss of the future-framing device is not a failure of fidelity but an acknowledgment that television operates through different temporal and affective registers than the novel form.

### **Medium Specificity and the Novelistic Fallacy**

Leitch's novelistic fallacy, the assumption that novels are inherently superior narrative vehicles, proves particularly relevant when examining the distinct affordances of prose fiction versus televisual storytelling in *The Power*. This fallacy rests on unexamined assumptions about literary complexity and visual superficiality that collapse under scrutiny.

The novel's primary strength lies in its ability to convey internal psychological states—the philosophical meditations of its characters on the nature of power itself. Alderman employs free indirect discourse to render the cognitive processes through which characters rationalise their increasingly violent actions. Margot Cleary's political machinations, Allie Monkton-Montgomery's religious manipulation, and Roxy Monke's navigation of criminal enterprises are presented through internal monologue that reveals the self-justifications accompanying their moral compromises.

The television adaptation necessarily externalises these psychological processes through performance, dialogue, and visual symbolism. However, this externalisation offers compensatory affordances unavailable to prose fiction. The visceral representation of the electrical power, visualised through special effects, sound design, and physical performance, creates an embodied understanding of the skein's destructive capacity that descriptive prose can only approximate. Scenes of mass violence, institutional collapse, and bodily vulnerability gain affective intensity through visual and auditory channels.

This finding aligns with Leitch's argument that different media excel at different representational tasks. The novel's philosophical depth and the television series' visceral immediacy represent complementary rather than hierarchical strengths. Evaluating the adaptation as inferior because it cannot replicate the novel's internal focalisation ignores the compensatory power of performance and cinematography.

### **Deconstructing Authorial Intent: The Auteurist Fallacy in Self-Adaptation**

The case of *The Power* presents a unique complication to Leitch's auteurist fallacy, the tendency to overemphasize individual creative control while ignoring collaborative production processes. Alderman's dual role as both novelist and showrunner might seem to resolve questions of authorial intention. However, closer examination reveals the persistence of collaborative mediation even in instances of self-adaptation.

Leitch contends that adaptation is inherently collaborative, involving not only writers and directors but also producers, actors, editors, and institutional gatekeepers. The television adaptation of *The Power* involved multiple directors across its nine episodes, a writers' room that contributed to script development, Amazon's commercial and strategic interests, and actors whose interpretive

choices shaped character representation. Toni Collette's performance as Margot Cleary, for instance, introduces gestural and vocal qualities that exist independently of Alderman's textual descriptions, creating a characterisation that is simultaneously faithful and inventive.

Furthermore, the temporal gap between the novel's composition (2016) and the series' production (2021-2023) means that even Alderman herself occupies a different subject position as showrunner than as novelist. The years between the book and the series saw major global shifts, including the #MeToo movement and a decline in democratic stability. These real-world pressures, along with the strain of the pandemic, likely led to an adaptation that emphasised themes different from those of the original novel. By accounting for this cultural landscape, we can see how the adaptation responds to a world that has changed since the book's first publication. The showrunner Alderman is not identical to the novelist Alderman; she interprets her own work through accumulated experience and changed contexts.

This finding suggests that even self-adaptation involves intertextual dialogue rather than simple transcription. The adapted text is not merely the original author's true vision finally realised in a new medium but rather a negotiated interpretation shaped by multiple agents and historical contingencies.

### **Reader Response and the Readerly Fallacy**

The reception of *The Power* adaptation exemplifies Leitch's readerly fallacy, the tendency to evaluate adaptations against individual readers' mental constructions rather than the actual source text. Analysis of online discourse surrounding the series reveals that many negative evaluations stem not from measurable departures from Alderman's novel but from violations of readers' imaginative investments.

Controversy centered on characterization choices, with viewers expressing dissatisfaction that characters did not look right or that their arcs diverged from expected trajectories. The adaptation's treatment of Margot Cleary proved especially contentious; the series renders her more sympathetic in early episodes, gradually revealing her ruthlessness through a series of decisions rather than through immediate characterisation. Some readers perceived this as a betrayal of the source material, yet textual analysis reveals that the novel similarly employs gradual revelation, distributed differently across narrative time.

This finding supports Leitch's argument that fidelity criticism frequently conflates personal interpretation with textual fact. Readers construct individualized versions of texts through imaginative engagement, then evaluate adaptations against these constructions rather than against the source material itself. The proliferation of divergent correct readings makes satisfying all viewers impossible, undermining fidelity as a meaningful evaluative standard.

### **Analysis of Character Development and Serial Narrative**

The transformation of Alderman's characters exemplifies how the formal properties of serialized television necessitate structural changes that fidelity criticism misreads as failures. The novel presents character development through episodic vignettes distributed across compressed historical time, allowing for rapid transformation and minimal psychological continuity. Television seriality, conversely, requires sustained character engagement across multiple episodes, necessitating different pacing strategies.

The adaptation's treatment of Allie Monkton-Montgomery, also known as Mother Eve, demonstrates this principle. In the novel, her transformation from an abused teenager to a messianic religious leader unfolds through narrative summary and temporal ellipsis. The television

series, requiring sustained viewer investment in the portrayal, devotes substantially more screen time to Allie's intermediate psychological states, rendering her trauma, opportunism, and genuine conviction as ongoing processes rather than accomplished facts.

Similarly, the relationship between Roxy Monke and her father is given greater treatment in the adaptation. The series uses seriality to develop its bond across multiple episodes before its violent dissolution, creating affective investment that makes subsequent betrayal more dramatically potent. The novel, operating under different temporal constraints, presents this relationship more schematically.

These adaptations reflect not artistic failure but formal intelligence, recognition that television's episodic structure requires different narrative rhythms than prose fiction. The adaptation succeeds by embracing rather than resisting medium-specific constraints.

### **Comparison between Ending Divergence and Interpretive Multiplicity**

The most significant textual divergence between novel and adaptation occurs in their respective conclusions, providing a crucial test case for Leitch's theoretical framework. The novel concludes apocalyptically, with women wielding overwhelming power, preparing to exterminate or subjugate men entirely. It is accompanied by the framing narrative's revelation that gender hierarchy has completely reversed. This ending emphasises the cyclical nature of oppression and suggests pessimism about human capacity to escape power's corrupting influence.

The television adaptation, while maintaining catastrophic violence, concludes more ambiguously, with power's distribution remaining contested and the possibility of different outcomes preserved. This tonal shift has generated criticism from readers invested in the novel's darker implications, yet Leitch's framework suggests we should interrogate rather than accept such criticism.

The divergent endings reflect different philosophical emphases rather than superior or inferior artistic choices. The novel's deterministic conclusion serves as a philosophical thought experiment, using speculative fiction to establish general principles about the operation of power. The television series' ambiguous conclusion serves the ongoing nature of serialized narrative, preserving interpretive openness and declining to foreclose meaning. Neither ending is more correct than the other; they represent distinct interpretive possibilities within the speculative premise. Evaluating the adaptation's ending as a failure requires privileging the source text's philosophical stance over the adaptation's alternative interpretation, precisely the hierarchical thinking Leitch critiques.

### **Key Findings**

This study reveals several significant findings about how *The Power* transforms through adaptation:

**1. Narrative Transformation:** Timeline compression serves specific ideological functions by maintaining focus on revolutionary disruption rather than normalized outcomes. It enables deeper character psychology through television's seriality while limiting certain feminist arguments requiring a long-term perspective.

**2. Visual Representation:** The series must make women's power visible through special effects and embodied performance. It creates both opportunities and risks: visual spectacle engages audiences viscerally, while also risking the commodification of feminist content.

**3. Character Adaptation:** Significant character changes reveal ideological negotiation, particularly Jos's inclusion, addressing biological essentialism in source material, demonstrating adaptation as interpretation responsive to contemporary gender theory.

**4. Contemporary Context:** The adaptation responds to the #MeToo movement, transgender rights movements, and evolving feminist discourse, engaging contemporary gender politics more explicitly than the 2016 novel.

**5. Medium Specificity:** Television's affordances of seriality, visual representation, and embodied performance create different feminist interventions than literary fiction, with neither medium superior but each enabling distinct political possibilities.

### **Conclusion**

*The Power* exemplifies the complexities of contemporary feminist media, achieving significant accomplishments while revealing persistent challenges. Adaptation theory proves valuable for analysing these complexities. Understanding adaptation as interpretation, process, and cultural practice, rather than merely as translation, enables us to appreciate how meaning transforms across media. Feminist approaches reveal that gender shapes every dimension of this process. The adaptation does not replace Alderman's novel, but enters into dialogue with it. The novel and series together constitute a richer, more complex feminist text than either alone, with the novel providing temporal scope and global perspective. In contrast, the series offers visual power and psychological depth. Both ask urgent questions concerning gender, power, and human nature. This study argues that adaptation is an ongoing feminist dialogue in which each retelling, reimagining, and transformation participates in negotiating the meanings of gender. *The Power* demonstrates the political significance of adaptation while revealing both the possibilities and the constraints of feminist cultural production in contemporary commercial media.

### **Suggestions**

Future research should examine audience reception across demographics; production processes; comparative adaptation studies across platforms and texts; transgender representation in adaptations; visual feminist aesthetics; and intersectional dimensions, including race, class, and disability.

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