

# The Golden Compromise

A reception study of the film adaptation based on  
*His Dark Materials: Northern Lights*

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# 1. Introduction

This thesis is written as part of the Literature Dissemination and Distribution study program in the department of Linguistics and Nordic Studies. It differs from other literary study programs in that it is more practically oriented with focus on the literary industry rather than textual meaning. Thus, the following will not be an analysis of aesthetic features, but a study of literary and media texts as part of a distributional network.

In 2007 New Line Cinema released *The Golden Compass*, a high-budget film adaptation of *Northern Lights* (1995), the first book in Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*. The studio intended for the film to be the beginning of a trilogy that could follow in the wake of the popular *The Lord of the Rings* movies (2001–2003), hoping it would launch a new major franchise. I watched the film upon its release, having read the novels it was based on as a preteen, and although I do not recall every detail from my first viewing of *The Golden Compass*, I remember it as a decent movie, not the best I had ever seen, but a good experience nonetheless. Therefore, I was surprised when it in 2011 became known that *The Golden Compass*' two planned sequels had been cancelled. There was little talk about *The Golden Compass* after that, until 2019 when a new attempt at adapting the novel trilogy was made in a collaboration between the BBC and HBO, this time as a mini-series for television with the title *His Dark Materials*. Following the announcement and release of the Tv-series there has been an influx of articles and blog posts reminiscing about the ill-conceived first attempt at adapting Pullman's work, how it failed in every way and what the producers of the series must do differently if they want to succeed. I question the seemingly undisputed perception of the film adaptation as a horrible failure, as it does not fit with my personal experiences. In this thesis I ask the question: How did promotional materials and media coverage potentially affect the audience reception of *The Golden Compass*?

The answer to why the movie failed in its endeavour changes depending on who is asked. Some, such as actor Sam Elliott, believes the trilogy was shut down due to protests from the Catholic Church (Adams, 2009). William Donohue, leader of The Catholic League of Civil and Religious Rights, claims it was abandoned in response to his organization's campaigning and boycott (Donohue, 2008). The film's writer and director, Chris Weitz, reportedly blames the studio's unwillingness to discuss themes that might be considered offensive, as he thinks they angered fans of the novel by straying too far from the source material (Plante, 2019). Pullman himself seconds this, believing the film would have been a

great success had they only stuck to the original themes of the novel (Schwartz, 2019). In hindsight, critics have claimed that the film failed because it simply was not very good, with some questioning whether Pullman's novels are just too complex to ever be successfully adapted on screen (Heritage, 2009; Levesley, 2019).

I hypothesize that the film's reception was largely shaped by how it was promoted and presented in media prior to its release. To investigate this, I will examine the film adaptation as a case study through a combination of the socioeconomic approach to adaptation theory as presented by professor of literary sociology and media, Simone Murray, and professor emeritus and film scholar Janet Staiger's theory of context-activated reception studies. While I am primarily focusing on *The Golden Compass*, I will be using the *His Dark Materials* Tv-series as a reference for comparison. First, I will study and compare a selected number of professional reviews to gain a general impression of how the adaptations were received upon release and how they were presented in media by critics. From there I will address and discuss various circumstantial elements related to promotion and media, asking questions like: What target demographics are the two adaptations aimed at? How do they differ and why does it matter? How significant was the effect of the religious resistance and the organized boycott for the film's reception? What was the state of the entertainment industry at the time of the adaptation's release? And could New Line have done anything differently to potentially salvage the film? I primarily rely on the books *Interpreting films* by Janet Staiger (1992), *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (2012) by Simone Murray and her chapter "The business of Adaptation: Reading the Market" in *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation* (2012), as well as the second edition of *A theory of Adaptation* by Linda Hutcheon (2013). I also reference Hans Robert Jauss' hermeneutic philosophical term "horizon of expectations" and Stuart Hall's essay *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (2006).

Contextual factors pertaining to production and industry are often ignored in academic adaptation and reception studies despite arguably playing a vital role in how contemporary audiences experience media texts (Murray, 2012, p. 5). A case study of this kind will not produce much conclusive evidence but may serve to highlight some of the ways in which intertextual and paratextual elements affect critical perception of artworks, and why a socioeconomic approach can be a valuable supplement to adaptation and reception studies.

## 2. Background: *Northern Lights*

*Northern Lights* (1995), titled *The Golden Compass* in certain countries outside of the United Kingdom, is the first book in Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*. The story begins in an alternate version of England, in a world resembling late 19<sup>th</sup> century Earth, and follows 11-year-old Lyra Belacqua on a quest to rescue her best friend Roger from the *Gobblers*, a mysterious group of child-kidnappers. Before leaving her home, Lyra is entrusted with an *Alethiometer*, a strange, all-knowing compass device that if read properly can answer any question asked. Her search takes her north to the icy tundra of Svalbard, where she encounters witches, talking polar bears and the enigmatic substance known as *Dust*. Eventually she uncovers a dreadful conspiracy; seeking to eradicate "original sin" the *Holy Church* (also known as the *Magisterium*) a totalitarian Christian organization, is performing horrific experiments on children, cutting away parts of their souls. The novel ends with Lyra crossing through a portal into a parallel world, it is the beginning of a journey that will span across several universes, including the land of the dead, and eventually lead to a cosmic war against *the Authority*; the being who calls himself God.

In Lyra's world, every human is followed around by a *dæmon* (pronounced like "demon"), an external expression of their soul in animal form. Through their shape, dæmons represent the character, strengths and weaknesses of their humans and define the threshold between child- and adulthood. The dæmons of children have yet to assume their true forms and can change shape at will, just like children can try on different personalities in their search to discover who they are. Dæmons resemble the medieval concept of the witch "familiar", an unearthly spirit in the shape of an animal bound in some sort of servitude to a witch or wizard, but the idea also draws upon the tripartite nature of man in Catholic theology, where human beings are believed to be made up of three distinctive parts: The body, the soul and the spirit (Strauss, 2004). The body is a physical structure and our connection to the material world. The soul is the mind, our intellect, conscience, will and emotions. While the spirit is our very life essence and the part that is believed to go on after death, granting humans eternal life. In Pullman's novels these three are represented as the body, dæmon and ghost. When a person from Lyra's world dies the three parts are separated as both ghost and dæmon leave the body, one going to the land of the dead, while the other is reduced to Dust, the particles that make up all things, and return to the universe. The relationship between these three parts is a major theme throughout the series and just one of the novel's many obvious references to theology and biblical lore.

Drawing upon the poetry of William Blake, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and motifs from *Genesis* for inspiration, *His Dark Materials* is meant to re-enact the tale of Adam and Eve as a coming-of-age story. In Pullman's novels the fall of humanity is reworked into an ascent from childhood to adulthood, presenting disobedience and rebellion against authority as important parts of growing up, while at the same time depicting the church as a suppressive force hindering self-knowledge and intellectual curiosity. The American literary professor Burton Hatlen identifies *His Dark Materials* as "a kind of 'anti-Narnia', a secular humanist alternative to Lewis's Christian fantasy" that reflects how differently the two authors understand *Paradise Lost* (Hatlen, 2005, p. 82). Where Lewis interprets Milton in a more orthodox and literal way, positing the devil as "evil" and God as the ultimate "good," Pullman offers an alternate reading more in tune with William Blake's late-eighteenth-century critique of the poem, in which Satan is depicted as a "complex Promethean rebel" and God as a merciless tyrant (Oliver, 2012). Hatlen underlines his observation with a comparison of the "satanic" figure of Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, who leads the charge against the false God, and the depiction of the Fall as a positive, redemptive event.

Despite his rigid stance against theocratic authority, the world of Pullman's novels is not necessarily a godless one. Through the concept of Dust, it can be argued that the series offers a spiritual belief system somewhat resembling various nature religions or contemporary paganism as a substitute for orthodox monotheistic faith. Derived from a passage of Milton's text that describes "his dark materials", the primal matter God uses to create the world, Pullman reimagines a primordial substance with a mind of its own that challenges the traditional western dichotomy of the spiritual and the corporeal (Bird, 2009). Dust is both tangible and abstract; it appears as golden particles that can be measured scientifically, but functions as a sentient force with all-knowing, hive-mind-like qualities that connects and unites every living thing. Pullman's Dust also resembles the scientific phenomenon known as cosmic or extra-terrestrial dust; tiny particles made up of various elements that exist in outer space. Through this merging of the scientific and the theological, the true "God" can be interpreted, not as one omnipotent being, but rather as the very material that makes up everything and the force that creates life. Dust fills so many metaphors in the story of *His Dark Materials*, that providing a singular definition of what it is becomes nearly impossible. However, in the first novel of the trilogy Dust's most prominent feature is the effect it has on adolescents undergoing puberty. Dust is particularly attracted to these children and is said to be the catalyst that causes their dæmons to "settle". Dust represents the awakening of sexual awareness, the transition between innocence and experience, which is why the church

perceives it as proof of “original sin.” By severing a child from his or her dæmon (soul) the church hopes to prevent Dust from settling, efficiently preventing pubertal change. While the Magisterium claims their work is for the greater good, the separation is depicted as a horrific mutilation, somewhat resembling the historic phenomenon of castrati, the castration of young boys to preserve their high-pitched singing voices. The “cut” children are forced to keep child-like qualities for the benefit of others, losing their curiosity and will to question authority, efficiently robbing them of a future as adults.

Pullman speaks openly about his distaste for organized religion but rejects the notion of himself as a “militant atheist.” He considers himself an agnostic, emphasizing that:

What I’m against is what William Blake called single vision – being possessed by one single idea and seeing everything in terms of this one idea, whether it’s a religious idea or a scientific idea or a political idea. (Schwartz, 2019)

The *His Dark Materials* trilogy are not the only works in his bibliography that question or attack the idea of religion. Pullman is also outspoken about political issues and has actively participated in several campaigns related to literature and civil rights. He strongly opposes the idea of age standardization and other forms of market segmentation in literature, stating that: “No publisher should announce on the cover of any book the sort of readers the book would prefer.” In 2008 he led a campaign against the introduction of age bands on the cover of children’s books, and in 2014 he was part of the *Let Books Be Books* campaign, to prevent children’s literature from being marketed based on gender stereotyping (Flood, 2014).

Neither adaptation explicitly explores the philosophic and literary history behind their source material, perhaps rightfully so as the first novel of the trilogy serves an introductory purpose and is significantly softer on the theological implications than later entries. Yet it is essential to have a general grasp of Pullman’s inspirations and political stance to fully understand the extent of expectations and reactions tied to the film and Tv-series respectively.

### 3. Theory and Method

I base my thesis on Simone Murray's socioeconomic approach to adaptation theory in combination with Janet Staiger's theory of context-activated audience reception. Both are advocates for a more context-oriented approach to film and media studies, but their methods and focal points somewhat differ. Murray wishes to expand the field of academic adaptation studies by considering contextual elements relating to the production and circulation of a work, while Staiger focuses largely on the individual spectator's experience in meeting with a media text and how circumstantial elements influence their reaction. In my study I attempt to combine their theories as I focus on the correlation between exhibition, promotional materials and audience reception.

#### 3.1 A Socioeconomic Approach

In her book *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (2012) Murray calls for a "long overdue" materializing of adaptation theory as she believes the contextual elements pertaining to production and industry has been largely ignored by adaptation scholars. When these topics *are* addressed, they are commonly presented as "irredeemably corrupting influences on art and culture" often combined with accusations of "Hollywoodization" (p. 5–12). Through a socioeconomic approach Murray encourages readers of adaptations to look beyond the dominant practices of textual and comparative analysis and instead consider themselves consumers of a product produced by an encompassing economic system. Such an approach begins with the question of *why* a specific artwork is chosen for adaptation, *how* it fits into a larger industrial system and *who* benefits from its existence (p. 122–123). To conceptualize the economic system of "the adaptation industry," Murray applies sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural field theory. In this model the material dimensions of the adaptation industry such as the commercial interests of industry stakeholders are foregrounded. Its central premise suggests that the cultural value of any work is socially constructed, perpetuated and challenged. This can be observed in how different elements of the adaptation network such as awards, reviews, spin-offs, etc. might inflate or decrease the critical esteem of a cultural text. Murray also notes that the "elevation of a text's cultural stocks in one sector may conversely diminish its prestige for specific audiences in another," such as avid comic book fans opposing the Hollywoodization of a cult classic (p. 125). A socioeconomic approach highlights how adaptations, primarily those made for screen and stage, are rarely produced by one single creator. While credit is traditionally

ascribed to creative heads like an author or director, the adaptation is shaped by the contributions of numerous industry agents, from screenwriters and actors to distributors and rights managers. All play some part in the production and consequently, they all hold some stake in the final product's potential success or failure. Murray notes that a socioeconomic approach to adaptation studies is not meant to replace textual analysis, but to complement it by providing insights adaptation analysts might not otherwise consider and to prevent the underestimation of:

[...] the ways in which legal, economic, industrial and systemic concerns dramatically influence which texts are considered for adaptation, within which sectors of global screen culture, and how the institutional apparatus equally facilitates creation of certain kinds of adaptations. (Murray, 2012, p. 137)

She believes such an approach can throw new light on not just the adaptations themselves, but their audiences as well as industrial structures, interdependent networks of agents, commercial contexts, legal matters and the relation between cultural and commercial studies.

In *Interpreting Films* (1992) Staiger presents the research field of reception theory by dividing it into three groups: Text-activated, reader-activated and context-activated (p. 35). Text-activated theories operate from the assumption that texts create or provide meaning and that the nature of the text controls or determines the reader's response. Most classic film theories, including formalist, structuralist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theory, consider the cinematic text the source of meaning and primarily focus on examining how this textual meaning affects audiences. The spectator is assumed to be a passive consumer who unquestioningly receives and absorbs the meanings presented by the text. Reader-activated theories reject this classical understanding of the spectator as passive and idealized. Largely dismissing the importance of author intention, as they examine how meaning is created by the audience and understood through the readers' individual features, experiences and personalities. Staiger argues that despite accounting for varying interpretations, because reader-activated theories do not contextualize the reader's experience, they tend to make generalizations. She presents the context-activated model as the ideal direction for modern reception theory. Context-activated theorists strive to examine the reader experience in a historical and circumstantial context by identifying influential factors such as individual traits and convictions, means of text production, circumstances of exhibition, preconceived notions about genre and other intertextual elements. The context-activated model differs from the reader-activated one as it does not assume that the meaning a reader derives from a text remains stable, but rather that "meaning is 'in' the contextual event of each reading" and will shift depending on the situation (p. 45–48). Staiger underlines that contextual reading does not

deny the existence of specific textual signs and features, nor does it claim that a text's meaning is entirely open, as a reader's basis for understanding is ultimately limited by their environment (p. 4). The aim of reception theory should not be to replace the author with the audience, but to identify the interplay of circumstantial factors that determine the meaning created in a specific reader-exchange event. Thus, contextual reception theory is not an exercise in textual interpretation, but rather a study of how meaning changes, performed by "identifying the codes and interpretative assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods" (p. 9).

Murray's socioeconomic approach to adaptation studies fit well with what I hope to accomplish in this thesis. As a student of literature distribution and dissemination, I have a particular interest in the field of adaptation as an alternative platform for conveying the contents of literary works to audiences. However, while Murray focuses on recollecting and tracing a specific text's movement through the network of the adaptation industry to document how it came to be and all the factors that influenced its production, I am more interested in the contextual elements related to paratexts, such as promotional materials and media publicity, and how these correspond with critical reception. This is why I have chosen to include Staiger's theory of context-activated reading, which I will consider from a socioeconomic angle. By focusing on intertextual and paratextual material, I aim to identify and study the contexts that framed *The Golden Compass*' production, reception and afterlife (or lack thereof). In doing so, I argue that industrial and commercial aspects can be just as influential on reception as textual content and that the "author" of an adaptation should not be perceived as a single authoritative entity with a vision, but rather as a number of creators collaborating within a set of circumstantial limitations.

At first glance, the theories of Staiger and Murray may appear to be somewhat at odds with each other. Staiger is sceptical to a socioeconomic approach to reception studies, claiming that cultural theorists tend to categorize audience informants based on generalized attributes, failing to account for the fragmented, complex nature of how readers identify themselves. Thus, they may overlook the identities most significant to the reader, which could have greater influence on their individual interpretation of a media text than their affiliation with their designated theoretical categories (Staiger, 1992, p. 72–74). As an alternative, Staiger suggests what she calls a "historical materialist approach" to reception studies. By studying the initial response to a cinematic text through reviews written at the time of its release, she proclaims that the text may be perceived in a historical context. The researcher should focus on what questions reviewers do and do not ask, and refrain from making

assumptions about preference based on generalized concepts such as class or gender. Ideally, a historical materialist reading should not stop at the initial reception but continue the study of its subject in the context of different time periods (Staiger, 1992, p. 91–93). Staiger’s understanding of how the meaning derived from a work will vary with every specific reading supports my hypothesis that the general perception of *The Golden Compass* has changed with time. Her suggested historical materialist method is practical and simple enough to execute within the scope of this thesis. The gap between Staiger and Murray’s approaches is not too wide for them to both be implemented successfully as Staiger recognizes means of text production and exhibition as factors relevant to audience reception (Staiger, 1992, p. 45–48). Murray is first and foremost concerned with adaptation theory, not reception studies. I understand her approach as a study of *one* set of potentially influential contextual factors that must be considered in relation to a bigger picture.

It should be mentioned that Staiger has received criticism regarding her historical materialist method. Media and culture scholar Joke Hermes accuses Staiger of being too biased in her chosen framework when applying her theories to real world examples and of relying too heavily on a limited selection of reviews and interpretations. Hermes questions the adamant fixation on context in Staiger’s work, suggesting that context by definition is just as much of an interpretive circuit as text-centric analysis, especially in historical reception research where accurate recollections and reliable sources are hard to come by (if they exist at all). Highlighting the potential problems that come with rereading meaning gathered from critics’ interpretations and reviews, Hermes calls for more empirical audience studies as she believes Staiger’s approach is too structuralist, advocating a “top-down” system of cultural criticism that grants too much authority to academics, exhibitors and reviewers. She considers Staiger’s approach a “closed style of reading” contexts that is ill-fitted to a modern understanding of audience reception (Hermes, 2000). The importance of context in reception studies remains debated, not only in terms of opposition with text-centric analysis, but as a question of how context should be defined and measured.

### **3.2 Historical Context**

Context-activated reception studies build upon the literary “reader-response theory” that originates in the writings of Hans Robert Jauss from the late 1960s. Jauss called for change in literary criticism by challenging the classically dominant position of text-oriented reading. He emphasized the importance of the audience and the integral role reader reception plays in

determining a work's aesthetic status and historic significance, claiming that the "historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees" (Jauss, 1970). Texts should not be understood as containers for objective meaning since the interpretative process is embedded in history, thus any reading will be informed by the conventions and expectations of its time period, including social and cultural influences. To fully understand literary history, it is not enough to simply study the literary works themselves: "[A literary work] is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence" (Jauss, 1970). To explain his understanding of the relationship between reader and text, Jauss uses the hermeneutic philosophical term "horizon of expectations". The reader's experiences and interpretations in meeting with the text are mediated against a horizon of expectations and assumptions shaped by contextual and intertextual elements. New texts can either conform to or subvert from an already established horizon and may be described as "light" or "challenging" reading depending on how well they cohere with the reader's preconceptions and whether they demand a "horizontal change." A literary critic must attempt to be aware of the relevant reader expectations to understand how and in what manner a text is received. Within the framework of context-activated reception studies this means that by studying texts through the experience of the reader, theorists may provide means for understanding not only *how* audiences interpret text, but *why* they interpret text differently.

I use the term "intertextuality" as understood by the literary theorist Gérard Genette through his structuralist approach to the relations between texts and his term "transtextuality" or "textual transcendence." Genette describes transtextuality as "all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette, 1992, p. 83–84). He presents intertextuality as one of five subcategories that make up transtextuality. It refers to the relationship between two or more texts and their influence on each other in the form of, for example, quotation, plagiarism or allusion. The second subcategory, "Paratextuality," is tied to those elements of a text that Genette believes may direct or control how it is received by readers. Split into "peritexts" and "epitext," it refers to elements of exhibition such as titles, chapters, prefaces and illustrations, as well as elements outside of the text: Interviews, promotional announcements, reviews, etc. The remaining subcategories include "metatextuality"; denoting explicit or implied references of one text to another text, for example through commentary. "Hypertextuality"; describing the relation between a text and a preceding hypotext that it somehow transforms, modifies or elaborates, such as parody or

translation. And finally, “Architextuality,” which refers to the designation of a text as part of a pre-existing genre or genres.

The text-centric focus of general film theory can be explained partly as a result of philosophical concern towards the potential of textual influence on ideology and the distribution of societal power. An example of this is the historical application of audience studies to advocate censorships that would ensure films would only communicate “appropriate” meanings. British cultural studies, a descendant of Marxist philosophy, emphasize the connection between mass communication and authority, perceiving texts as a tool used by those in power to maintain control and enforce a dominant ideology (Staiger, 1992, p 68–69). Such theories rely upon the communication model of encoding and decoding, first developed by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall in his essay *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (1973). Taking a semiotic approach to film studies, Hall posits film as a form of communication; producers encode messages and values into texts through the use of signs, which the audience in turn decodes to extract meaning. In the case of cinematic texts, such signs include anything from lighting, audio, angle, duration of shots, juxtaposition, costuming, etc. with levels of complexity varying from the simplistic depiction of a literal skull to the subtle inclusion of the Dies Irae in the musical score, both signifying death as a theme.

This approach correlates with the premises of Soviet montage cinema and structuralist film theory as demonstrated by the aesthetic theorist Lev Kuleshov in the late 1910s. Kuleshov theorised that spectators derive more information and meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots, than from a singular, isolated image. He demonstrated this through a series of experiments in which audiences were shown a short film of a man with an expressionless face in sequence with various other images: A plate of soup, a girl in a coffin, and a woman on a divan. Although the image of the man’s face remained unchanged in every sequence, Kuleshov noted that the audience believed the actor changed his demeanour to express feelings of hunger, grief and desire, depending on what he was “looking at” (Kuleshov, 1974). Kuleshov’s experiments support Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding, demonstrating how a producer or editor can directly influence the meaning derived from a text that might otherwise signify something completely different. In media studies this could be applied to, for example, understand how mass media news outlets may influence and sway the public opinion about persons, events and ideologies. Simultaneously the experiments demonstrate how audiences create their own understanding of text through association and

emotional reactions, displaying their ability to read meaning that does not otherwise exist and may not be intended by the creator.

According to Hall, a spectator may adopt one of three positions when decoding a text: A dominant or “preferred reading” happens when the audience interprets and understands the text exactly the way its creator intended, accepting the ideologies or meanings it communicates. Alternatively, a “negotiated reading” may happen if the audience understands the creator’s intended meaning but needs to adapt it to fit better with their preconceived beliefs or ideologies before fully accepting it. Lastly, an “oppositional reading” happens when a spectator rejects the producer’s intended reading, substituting it with a meaning of their own creation. Such readings commonly occur in texts with controversial themes the audience disagrees with or in texts that deal with complex narratives or topics too far removed from the spectators’ contemporary reality (Hall, 1973). While Hall is largely concerned with matters of class and politics, his model can also be applied to describe how producers may encode texts with meaning to address specific audiences for economic gain as part of demographic marketing. Staiger recognizes this as an area worth examining as part of context-activated reception research (Staiger, 1992, p. 75).

### **3.3 Defining Adaptation**

Adaptation can be anything from the recreation of a painting as a tapestry, to a video game based on a movie, to the conversion of a literary figure into the motif of a musical score. In the second edition of her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as: An acknowledged “creative and interpretive transposition of a recognizable other work or works” into a different set of conventions or sometimes, but not always, an entirely different medium (p. 33–34). This process is often compared to translation, as a conversion of a perceived meaning from one medium “language” to another. Hutcheon argues that the change between mediums bears greater resemblance to transmutation or transcoding, describing it as: “Translations in the form of inter-semiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)” (p. 16). She regards the comparison between the two disciplines with some suspicion, noting that the “source text” is commonly perceived with a sense of “axiomatic primacy and authority” within translation theory, a notion she believes resembles the historic fixation on fidelity and equivalence in the field of adaptation.

According to Hutcheon, the majority of contemporary adaptation theorists will agree that “fidelity criticism” should not be dominating the study of adaptations. Thus, the practice of judging the quality of an adaptation based on how far it strays from its “source” is no longer commonplace within academia. However, for a long time this was the orthodox approach, shaping much of the early work done in the field. The so called “fidelity debate” was still ongoing less than twenty years ago and the ghost of fidelity criticism lives on in contemporary reviewing practices, especially of films adapted from popular novels (p. Xxvi). The concept of fidelity in adaptation is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it assumes that texts contain singular meaning which can be “faithfully” transferred and re-told, leaving no room for differing interpretations. It also mostly ignores the specifics, restrictions and semiotics of the various medium “languages.” The notion of fidelity places the “original” text on a pedestal, as the ultimate goal, and paradoxically holds the adaptation up next to it, an approach that is essentially making it impossible for any adaptation to succeed as no recreation will ever *be* the original. It also implies that the goal of any adapter is simply to reproduce the adapted text, an assumption that is faulty in and of itself. As film scholar Thomas Leitch puts it: “. . .the main reason adaptations rarely achieve anything like fidelity is because they rarely attempt it.” He argues that the primary motive for fidelity in adaptation is financial, not aesthetic, as a pre-existing intellectual property presumably comes with an already established audience. Thus, any artistic liberties taken by the adapter risks alienating these potential consumers (Leitch, 2007, p. 127–128). An imposed need for fidelity can potentially hurt the overall quality of the adaptation, as its creators might settle for uninspired compromises in place of original solutions where medium limitations or other contextual factors force deviation from the source material.

In place of fidelity to form, some argue that successful adaptations should be recognized by their ability to capture and convey the “spirit” of their source material. This elusive notion presumably refers to elements like “style” or “tone,” but according to Hutcheon, these terms are far too subjective to be of use to adaptation theorists (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 10). Theme, on the other hand, is arguably one of the easier story elements to transfer and preserve, considering how famous works like *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cinderella* have been adapted countless times without losing their initial themes of forbidden love and rags to riches. Adaptation represents both inevitable difference as well as repetition, in other words: A re-visitation of a theme with variations. Thus, a successful adaptation could be defined as a text that reinvents something familiar, keeping it fresh by introducing new elements or perspectives (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 114–115).

In many cases, especially in film and stage adaptation, the transition between mediums means the adapter's job consists largely of subtracting and cutting what he or she considers non-essentials. This often results in what Hutcheon perceives as a tendency, both in academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, to disregard contemporary popular adaptations as a secondary, simplistic or commercialized way of reworking content. Particular medium forms and genres appear to hold an imagined higher status than others; literature for example will for some always have superiority over film due to its seniority as an artform. Thus, adaptations that are perceived to "lower" the story they are conveying are more likely to receive criticism: "It does seem to be more or less acceptable to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* into a respected high art form, like an opera or a ballet, but not to make it into a movie, especially an updated one" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 3–4). In response to this Hutcheon suggests a shift away from the traditional medium focus of adaptation studies by examining adaptation in relation to the process of reception through what she calls the three "modes of engagement": Telling, showing and interacting. The modes are meant to highlight the correlation between how a story is presented and how it is received and experienced by audiences. Hutcheon believes this approach can "allow for certain precisions and distinctions that a focus on medium alone cannot." Each mode triggers differing mental, physical and sensory responses from the audience: The "telling mode" involves verbal communication, either oral or printed, and immerses audiences through description, explanation and imagination, unconstrained by the limits of the visual or physical world. The "showing mode" refers to visual and aural storytelling, engaging audiences through direct sensory stimulation, and demonstrating that words are not needed for communication. The "interactive mode" involves some form of participation from its audience; video games or amusement parks may convey story, but the recipient is required to physically engage to move the narrative forwards (p. 22–27).

Hutcheon stresses that none of the modes of engagement ever take place in a vacuum and must be considered as part of a greater context. While contextual factors may force change upon an adaptation, the adapter could attempt to manipulate the conditions that will frame the audience's experience in meeting with his or her work. To exemplify this, she specifically mentions Pullman's novel trilogy, referencing the time it was adapted as a stage play in London. The adapter, Nicholas Wright, converted 1,300 pages of novel into two three-hour plays. To do so, he had to cut major characters and locations, speed up the action and explicitly explain certain themes and plot details (p. 19).

The two plays that were finally seen in London at the National Theatre in 2003 and revised in 2004 were set within an elaborate "paratextual" context in order to prepare the audience and perhaps forestall any objections: the program was larger and much

more informative than most, offering photos, interviews with the novelist and the adapter, maps, a glossary of places, people, things, and “other beings”, and a list of literary intertexts. (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 30)

This example highlights another important element of both adaptation theory and reception studies, namely the distinction between “knowing” and “unknowing” audiences. If the members of the audience are not aware that what they are experiencing is an adaptation or have no prior knowledge of the work that it interprets, they perceive it as they would any other text. However, audiences with foreknowledge of the work that is being adapted meet the adaptation with a preconceived horizon of expectation and the ability to fill in potential gaps by referencing the story they already know. Hutcheon notes that adapters often rely on this ability, sometimes so much that the resulting adaptation makes no sense to new audiences. Knowing audiences can potentially make the transition between mediums go smoother as they will still be able to follow a heavily condensed plotline, however, an audience that is overly attached and nostalgic towards the source material presents a particular challenge, imposing that previously mentioned need for fidelity. Hutcheon also writes about how adaptations have the power to permanently alter the audience’s perception of the adapted work. For unknowing audiences, the adaptation could potentially usurp the source material and become the “original” that they will refer to upon future readings of related texts (p.120–121).

### **3.4 Method**

As previously stated, I will carry out my research as a qualitative case study based on a combination of Murray’s socioeconomic theory and Staiger’s historical materialist method with focus on intertextual connections to other media texts, contextual issues such as potential religious controversy, and paratexts in the form of promotional materials, interviews, audience demographics, etc. While my primary focus lies on *The Golden Compass*, I will use the Tv-adaptation *His Dark Materials* as a complementary reference for comparison to strengthen the foundation for my speculations about the film. This includes comparing paratextual and intertextual elements in search of similarities and distinct differences. However, my thesis is not a true comparative study as that would be an endeavour of far greater size than what I can hope to accomplish here.

I will begin my study by reading and comparing professional reviews of *The Golden Compass* and *His Dark Materials* gathered from newspapers, magazines and online outlets. I do this for two reasons: Firstly, to gain an impression of how each adaptation was generally received to use as a basis for my study and secondly, to observe how the adaptations were

presented in media at the time of their releases. I acknowledge that professional film critics may not be representative of mass audiences, thus I considered collecting opinions and writings from sources such as online forums and the likes, but ultimately decided against it as I have no means for determining the identity of such informative subjects nor the authenticity of their statements. Spectators' recollections of a media text experience may become clouded with time and their opinions might sway with the knowledge of how well or poorly the text was received by the majority of the public. In this case the contemporary awareness of the fact that *The Golden Compass* never got any sequels might colour a spectator's perception of the film as "bad" despite what they might have thought about the same text upon their initial viewing. By limiting this part of my research material to only include reviews written by professional critics, at least I ensure that the observations compared were all made and presented regardless of each other.

Following, I will address and discuss circumstantial elements related to promotion and media coverage based on official statements from the adaptations' creators, interviews and the observations and claims made by the reviewers. I am not looking to validate or disprove the reviewers' interpretations; my goal is simply to identify and discuss various factors that potentially could have had some sway on how *The Golden Compass* performed both critically and commercially. This study will not be definitive as it only focuses on certain aspects of a bigger context. I will not be analysing the aesthetic contents or meanings of the adaptations, nor their level of artistic "success," I am merely observing their reception and speculating about potential causality. If I do address the aesthetic contents, it will be as another contextual element in correlation with a specific cause or effect.

I have chosen this approach because I believe that this particular film adaptation exemplifies the potential importance of intertextual and contextual influences on film reception and demonstrates how readers' perception and consideration of texts change over time. Audience reception is a varied and complex field that overlaps with numerous other disciplines including, but not limited to: Literature, media and cultural studies. I could have chosen to approach my questions regarding *The Golden Compass* in any number of ways, however, due to the limited scope of this thesis and my particular interest in studying a specific film and author from the perspective of a student of literature dissemination and distribution, a qualitative research method will be the most practical. The ideal approach to audience and reception studies is arguably empirical. Thus, information gathered through interviews or surveys might have been preferable, but as my subject of study is a film that came out more than ten years ago, complemented by a Tv-series that audiences watch at their

own leisure outside the context of a movie theatre, this is not a viable option. While I will keep the existence of more empirically inclined theorists in mind, I will not attempt to address every part of the field of reception studies.

This method is in no way foolproof and I acknowledge that a number of reception theorists actively oppose the idea of particularized case studies, such as in the article *Is There an Audience in the House?* (2010) Where professor of film and media studies, Philippe Meers, addresses the role of ethnographic and qualitative research practices in film studies versus more empirical methodologies. He argues that the examination of professional reviews and surveys does not bring any clarity to those seeking to understand the actual experience of film audiences and thus, is of no more use to reception theorists than textual analysis (p. 141). To this I will argue that there is a difference in how audiences initially experience a film on an individual level and how that same film is retrospectively understood and regarded in our collective memory. Because this particular case is not an analysis of aesthetic content, I am not seeking to dissect the personal interpretations and meanings experienced by members of the audience in meeting with the film, but rather to observe the environments that framed both the film's initial release and its ensuing reputation.

## 4. Reception

### 4.1 Commercial Performance

The following is a brief summary of the commercial performances of both *The Golden Compass* and *His Dark Materials*. I find little purpose in directly comparing these numbers as the difference in medium makes them too far removed from each other. Each adaptation started out with vastly different production budgets and economical limitations: Tv-dramas are generally cheaper to produce than motion pictures, the production cost of animation has presumably changed in the scope of the last ten years, and there is no way to account for the exact salaries of either cast of high-profile actors. Instead I will compare *The Golden Compass* to similar cinematic texts released in the same time period. This gives an impression of not only how the film was generally received by audiences, but what expectations its producers presumably had for their product.

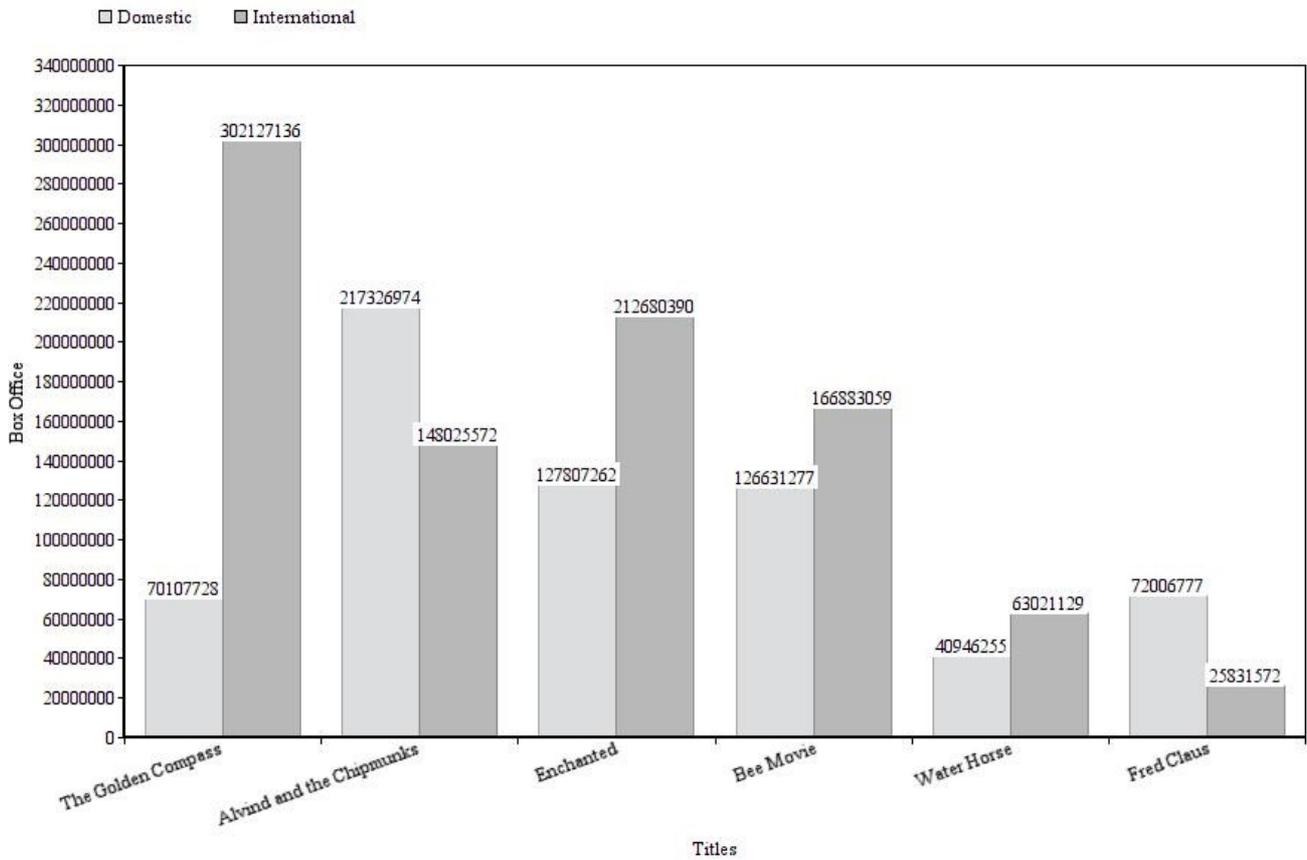
All numbers regarding *The Golden Compass* and its competitors are taken from *Boxofficemojo.com*, a website dedicated to tracking and listing box office revenue as part of the popular internet database *IMDb*. While the information provided by such sites should always be regarded with a certain level of scepticism, as far as I can tell the numbers presented correspond with those referenced in interviews and similar sources.

#### 4.1.1 The Golden Compass

Figure 1 demonstrates how *The Golden Compass* performed both on the domestic and international market compared to other American family films released in the same time period. It should be noted that while all the films referenced are considered “family films,” they do not share the same PG rating in neither the US nor UK. Despite doing poorly within the United States, internationally *The Golden Compass* was the highest grossing family film of the last quarter of 2007. It did particularly well in the United Kingdom, where it was one of the highest grossing non-sequels of that year. Ultimately it brought in roughly \$372 000 000 total worldwide. Considering these numbers by themselves it is not immediately clear why the film was regarded as a commercial flop.

**Figure 1**

American family films released in the period October-December 2007



**Figure 2**

Production budget compared with total grossing worldwide

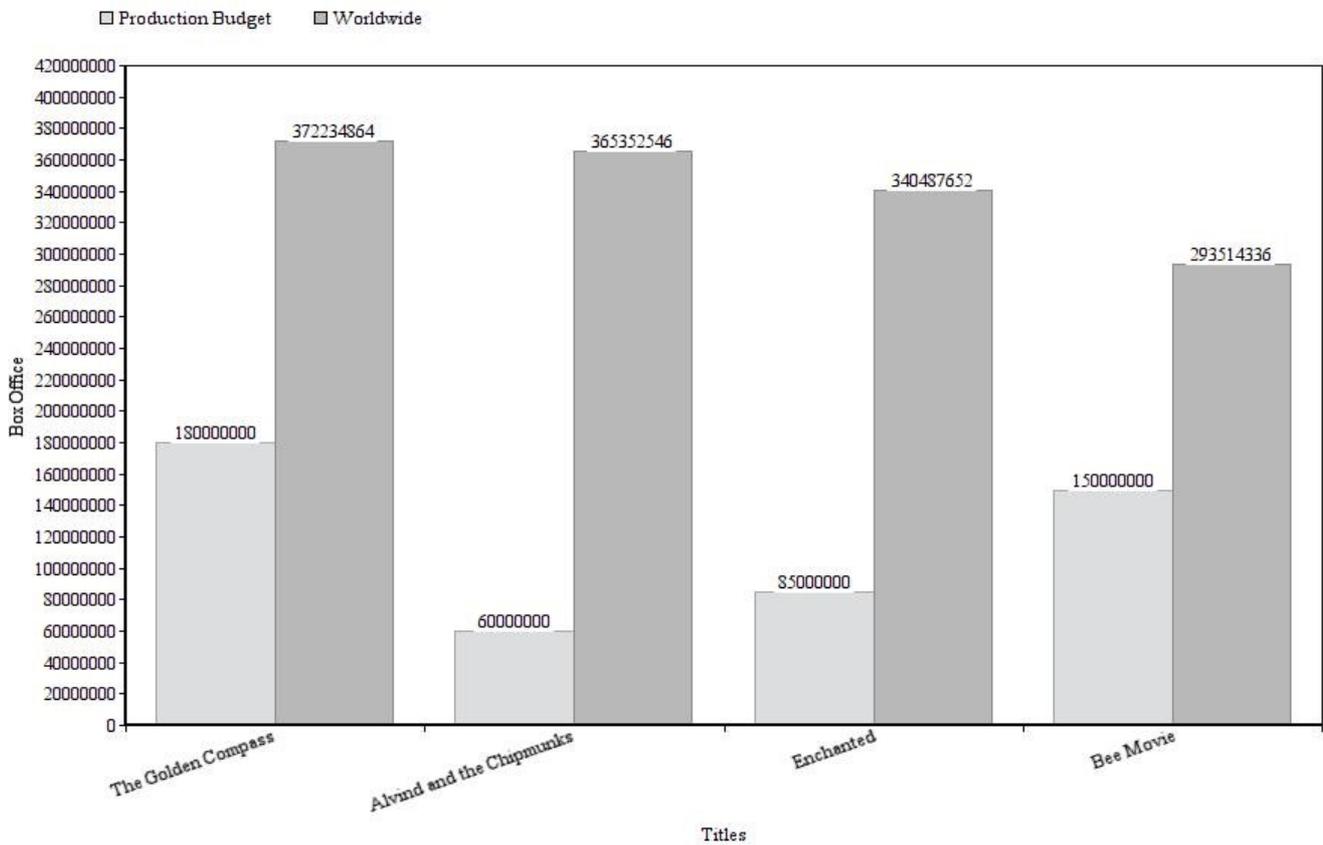


Figure 2 compares the production budget and worldwide revenue of *The Golden Compass* and its three biggest competitors at the time of its release. With high production costs of about \$180 000 000, the film had a considerably lower financial surplus than most of its competition despite selling the most tickets. \$372 000 000 was not a high number for a blockbuster fantasy film adaptation in the era after *The Lord of the Rings*. Considering how the *Harry Potter* franchise at the time was bringing in \$898 400 000 on average per film, or how *The Golden Compass*' greatest spiritual competitor *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) just a couple of years earlier grossed for a total of \$745 000 000 worldwide on a similar production budget. To make things worse, as part of raising the film's production costs New Line had already sold off the foreign distribution rights before making the movie and thus did not fully benefit from its sales overseas. For the film to be a commercial success New Line depended on the domestic market and with ticket sales of a mere \$70 000 000 it was clear that *The Golden Compass* would not become "the next big fantasy epic" they had been hoping for. The last in a string of unsuccessful films for the studio, *The Golden Compass* marked the death of New Line Cinema as an independent production company. Shortly after its release the creators declared bankruptcy and the company was merged into Warner Bros (Eller, 2008).

#### **4.1.2 His Dark Materials**

Calculating the commercial performance of *His Dark Materials* (2019) is a little trickier as there are fewer reliable sources for numbers related to production value and grossing per episode, especially because the series was released simultaneously both on TV and as a streaming service. Different news outlets report that the show cost less than \$7 million per episode, giving it a production budget of about \$56 000 000. This would make it the BBC's most expensive production to date. Sources vary on the exact numbers, but all seem to agree that the TV-series did much better in the UK than overseas in the US, presumably having more than twelve times the viewers when it first aired (Erao, 2019). However, these statistics become muddled by the existence of online streaming services, as both BBC One and HBO provide the option of watching programs online after their initial broadcast times. It is also relevant to mention that BBC One has a significantly greater regional reach with less competition in the UK than HBO does in the US.

According to the *Independent*, 7.2 million viewers followed the broadcast premier of *His Dark Materials* on BBC One, making it "the biggest new British series in over five years

on any [UK] channel” (Stolworthy, 2019). Across the pond, the *Hollywood Reporter* placed *His Dark Materials* “in the middle of the pack for recent HBO premieres” with about 424 000 viewers (Porter, 2019). Tv-dramas commonly experience a drop in audiences after a premier and already by the second episode *His Dark Materials* on BBC One was down by 1.5 million viewers. From there, the numbers continued to dip with further episodes until the season came to a close with just over 4 million viewers (Kanter, 2019). By this time, it had been surpassed in popularity by other BBC dramas.

It is unclear what sort of revenue BBC and HBO have obtained from the series and whether it will be enough for *His Dark Materials* to be renewed for a third (and potentially forth) season. Nevertheless, its producers appear confident. Even before the series’ first season premiered, production of a second season was already underway. This decision was supposedly made to avoid the child actors from visibly aging up too much in-between seasons (Stolworthy, 2019).

## **4.2 Critical Reception**

The observations made in the following chapter are based on 60 selected reviews (25 covering *The Golden Compass* and 35 on *His Dark Materials*), taken from a mix of American, British and Norwegian magazines, newspapers and website articles published around the time the adaptations first released. I read them in search of similar patterns and attempt to evaluate which elements caused the greatest unanimity or discourse between the reviewers. How do the critics prioritize? Which topics are most frequently mentioned? And are the reviews predominantly positive or negative? I briefly considered comparing the professional reviews to fan ratings reported by digital platforms such as *Metacritic* and *RottenTomatoes.com*, but ultimately decided against it as the information presented on these sites is too unreliable and easily manipulated. I also chose not to include any direct summation of the professional critics’ scores for the adaptations, mostly due to the fact that each paper or site uses different scales for measuring cinematic accomplishments (while a fair number omits them completely), making it hard to draw any consistent conclusions.

### **4.2.1 The Golden Compass**

When discussing any aesthetic text, it is important to make the distinction between economic and artistic achievements and acknowledge that the two might not necessarily be connected. The creative qualities of a work should be evaluated independently, regardless of what sort of

revenue it brought its creators. All commercially successful films are not innovative masterpieces and not all critically acclaimed works are immediately recognized by the masses. An example of this school of thought is the classic split between art-house cinema and mainstream commercial film. I remark upon this in response to what I perceive as a notable tendency within popular media to read and report the economic failure of a cinematic text as proof of its artistic shortcomings. “*The Golden Compass* wasn’t given any sequels because it didn’t deserve any.” Wrote Stuart Herritage, wise with hindsight in a 2009 article for *The Guardian*, drawing a direct parallel between the film’s creative and commercial performance. His sentiment is not the only one, as most retrospective critics fail to address how intertextual and paratextual factors could potentially affect the film’s commercial reception, instead ascribing all blame to weaknesses in the aesthetic text. Based on its relatively low grossing at the box office and the biting remarks from contemporary commentators, one could be led to believe that *The Golden Compass* was collectively dismissed by the critics of its time, yet this was not the case. The film received mixed, but generally decent scores in reviews, rarely earning the highest marks, but never really receiving the worst ones either.

Starting out, I hypothesised that there would be some correlation between which qualities critics would emphasise and their nationality, expecting critics from the US to focus more on the religious aspects of the story, and reviews from the UK to be more concerned with literary fidelity and the translation of the novel. These assumptions were primarily based on recent, retrospective writings published in response to the announcement of the Tv-adaptation. Considering the film’s commercial performance in the UK and the US respectively, I was surprised to find that there does not appear to be any significant differences or clear pattern of prioritization in reviews written by critics with different nationalities. Norwegian reviewers show some distinctive interest in film location, as some of the establishing shots and background scenery has been filmed in Norway, but this is more of an afterthought and does not otherwise influence the reviews. In hindsight, these findings make sense as the countries in question all belong to the same western culture, and thus presumably share similar customs for judging Hollywood films.

Only a handful of critics take the time to clarify whether they have read the novel before watching the film, meaning it is difficult to make any confident assumptions about the general attitude regarding the question of fidelity. Among the few who do mention having previous knowledge of the novel there seem to be a consensus that the film bypasses important sections of the story, but to what extent this weakens the moviegoing experience

opinions range from *The Guardian*'s optimistic 4 out of 5 stars and careful notion that: "As with many adaptations of this sort, a lot of the novel's supporting background material which might acclimatise us to the story's strange and distinctive world has been stripped out" (Bradshaw, 2007). To Olly Richards' crushing 2 out of 5 review for *Empire*, in which he accuses the filmmakers of reducing every memorable scene from the novel into a passage of hasty exposition, and every character of importance into an empty plot device, concluding that: "Really, if you're just going to have events described to you, why not read the book?" (Richards, 2007). One of the most common concerns in relation to the question of fidelity is how much of the story audiences who have not read the source material are missing out on. Chris Kohler, writing for the magazine *Wired*, stated:

Fans of the books will likely find New Line's film version of *The Golden Compass* to be a disappointingly paper-thin rendition that barely scratches the surface [...] But those who haven't read the books will likely be even worse off, as I'm not sure they'll have any idea what's going on to begin with. (Kohler, 2007)

Meanwhile *Deep Focus Reviews*' Brian Eggert, whom had very little prior knowledge of the books, wrote that to him the story was just as engaging as that of similar franchises and that he enthusiastically wished for the full trilogy to be "made into pictures as good as this one" (Eggert, 2007).

Apart from the film's ending, which differs greatly from that of the novel, direct textual changes of scenes or events are not generally commented upon. The critics appear more concerned with the translation and preservation of elements like atmosphere, themes and character personalities. Those who do mention the ending typically describe it as "disappointing" or "confusing," questioning the filmmakers' decisions and noting that the hopeful into-the-sunset conclusion is less dramatically satisfying than the original cliff-hanger and that it leaves too many questions unanswered. However, to prevent spoiling the plot for audiences no further elaborations are made on this topic. There is an observable philosophical discrepancy in how closely critics seemingly believe an ideal adaptation should mimic its source material and their attitudes towards alterations and the introduction of new content. Manohla Dargis, from *The New York Times*, wrote that the film stuck as closely to its source material as can be expected from a "114-minute, big-screen translation of a 400-or-so-page-novel" concluding that "*The Golden Compass* has many of the virtues of a faithful screen adaptation and many of the predictable flaws" (2007). Dargis is one of those who seemingly consider high fidelity to be a positive trait, commending the adaptation for trying not to deviate too far from its source. While such sentiments are in the majority, some critics question the purpose of an adaptation that does not add anything to the material it is

projecting. For them the film following the novel too scrupulously comes off as predictable and uninspired, as if the creators simply followed a checklist of what to include without engaging with the material (Richards, 2007). In other words, the critics disagree both on the adaptation's level of fidelity (or lack thereof), and on whether to perceive this as a positive or negative trait.

The topic of worldbuilding is addressed by a majority of the reviews, though the term is used to describe both the look of the film: Visual design, costumes, effects, etc. as well as the world of the story communicated through exposition, internal logic, consistency and character. *The Golden Compass* won the 2008 Academy Award for "best achievement in visual effects" and was nominated for "best achievement in art direction." It also won the 2008 BAFTA Award for "best special visual effects" and has received various other prizes for its costuming and production design (IMDb, 2019). Considering New Line's investment into the visuals, with a significant part of the film's hefty budget going into CGI and animation, it would be strange for critics not to mention these elements. Thus, it is interesting how, depending on who you ask, the visual effects are presented as either the best or the worst part of the film. Despite a minority who thought the quality of the film's CGI to be "...ridiculously bad, as if the director's 15-year old nephew got a copy of Adobe After Effects for his birthday and made them during study hall" (Kohler, 2007) the computer animations are mostly described as "astonishing" and "innovative," said to pull in children and adult audiences alike. Yet a number of critics are under the impression that the overwhelming focus on effects comes at the expense of other elements. Not so much a critique of the visuals themselves, these reviews accuse the film of relying too heavily on its visuals to cover up for a lack of story. The human aspects drown in visual effects, wrote Norwegian critic Jan Stian Vold, the animated polar bears look realistic enough, but they are too stiff with little personality (2007). Owen Gleiberman, from *Entertainment Weekly*, described it as: "Big, noisy, and fantastic yet curiously sodden..." (2007). While Christopher Orr, for *The Atlantic*, wrote: "*The Golden Compass*, while not a bad movie, is one that fails at perhaps the most crucial challenge of fantasy: creating a fully realized world, with its own internal rules and logic..." (2007). The shallow framework of Lyra's world seems evident to even the most positive commentators and the consensus is that while the film looks good, not enough time is spent on establishing consistency, which hinders full audience immersion. The delivery of what little foundational information there is, is also reported as a problem. A world established predominantly through voice-over or explanatory dialogue appears problematic to a fair share of critics as it breaks

with the “show, don’t tell” principle of cinematic storytelling, making it harder for audiences to differentiate between plot-relevant and “filler” information.

The reliance on spoken exposition may be a result of the film’s limited runtime. Telling a 400-page story in less than two hours does not leave much room for contemplation, and even the most enthusiastic critics agree that the film never really gives its audience a break to catch their breath. There is simply too much novel for a film of this length considering how the filmmakers have chosen to keep the storyline mostly intact, with few cuts in plot and events. The result is a film that “feels simultaneously too long and desperately rushed” (McDonagh, 2007). The reasoning behind the decision to keep the film relatively short remains enigmatic. Most of its genre peers of the time, including both *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, were generally pushing the two-and-a-half-hour mark, nearly forty minutes longer than *The Golden Compass*. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the explanation is, at least partly, financial, yet some critics also speculate that it could have something to do with New Line targeting a younger audience (Kohler, 2007). This is interesting as very few critics otherwise question what age-group is intended as the film’s target audience, an observation I will explore extensively in the following chapters. Targeting younger audiences is not necessarily the most logical approach when adapting Pullman’s novels and I was expecting more of the reviewers to make note of this.

Child audiences is also put forth as a possible reason for the film’s simplification of the novel’s plot and anti-religious undertones. The vast majority of critics have something to say about the portrayal of religion, likely influenced by the media controversy it caused when it was first announced. This is perhaps the only point on which every review is in total agreement, even highly conservative critics representing publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor* (who hated everything about the film) concur that “any alleged anti-religiousness has been watered down to near nonexistence” (Rainer, 2007). Many perceive this as problematic since it arguably removes the original story’s purpose. The film sets up an authoritative antagonist but is too vague on the nature of their villain. By removing too much of Pullman’s vision it ends up as “a film that knows what it’s against (frowning white-haired conspiracists in fussy clerical suits) but never quite figures out a way to voice what it’s for” (Gleiberman, 2007).

In many ways it seems the critics don’t fully know what to expect from *The Golden Compass*, a sentiment reflected in its mediocre to average scores. When studying and comparing reviews it appears to be a film of inconsistencies: It is not original, but it is entertaining, the actors are good, but the characters are not, the world is beautiful, but poorly

realised, the story is very complex, but too simplified, and the pacing is somehow both too fast and too slow at the same time, with too much focus on action, but also too much dialogue and exposition. *The Golden Compass* is simultaneously “a smartly realized adaptation” (Rea, 2007) and “a near-impenetrable murk, a blur of CGI beasts, shimmering dust clouds, and vaguely mystical blather” (Stevens, 2007). Whether the critic is positive or negative, the film comes off as lacking personality and direction. It is a generic Hollywood blockbuster; an entertaining spectacle with little more to it.

## 4.2.2 His Dark Materials

It is obvious that *His Dark Materials* is not reviewed purely on its own artistic merits as it is constantly measured based on the performance of its predecessor. Out of the 35 reviews included in this thesis only 4 do not mention and compare it to the film adaptation. It then begs the question: Does the film’s renown as a failure hurt or boost the success of the Tv-series? It has been twelve years since *The Golden Compass* released in cinemas and it is being remembered as a commercial flop that never got any sequels and was partially responsible for bankrupting its producer. Thus, the bar for utter failure has already been set and unless the Tv-series makes an even worse impression, it ultimately comes out in a better light receiving critiques like: “I was, throughout, generally impressed by how consistently HBO’s *His Dark Materials* accomplishes things the movie wasn’t able to do and didn’t even attempt” (Fiendberg, 2019) and “...even as the BBC/HBO adaptation of the books has stumbled at times, there has been confidence in knowing that there was no way they would make the same mistake New Line made” (McNutt, 2019). Despite this, the series receive many of the same criticisms as the film did and there really is no greater unanimity in opinion among reviewers this time around. Reviews range from the overly enthusiastic to the outright dismissive, and just like its predecessor it generally ends up with decent to mediocre scores. Kelly Lawler, writing for *USA Today*, sums up what could arguably be presented as the general takeaway: “[*His Dark Materials*] is not the series fans hoped for, but it’s better than the movie” (2019).

The most conspicuous comparison made considers the level of anti-religious content present in each adaptation. Not surprising, as the lack of any purposeful theological meaning was one of the more prominent issues critics had with the film. What is curious about *His Dark Materials*, however, is how it paradoxically is reported to be both uncompromising in its approach to the anti-religious themes and not anti-religious at all. “Unlike the 2007 movie, which was a critical and commercial flop, the new series [...] is not afraid to explore religion

or politics” wrote Alicia Cohn for *Christianity Today*. She finds the Tv-drama’s portrayal of the Magisterium more nuanced than the “standard church-as-oppressive force” angle of other series, perceiving it as a depiction of what Christianity would be without Jesus Christ (2019). Meanwhile Myles McNutt from the *AVclub* wrote: “It’s clear that the show is committing to the religious dynamics of this story [...] but I can’t shake the way the show’s lack of clarity on what the Magisterium actually is muddles everything” (2019). Ani Bundel from *NBC News* reported that she believes the series preserves the serious themes and that: “The book’s anti-religious overtones also remain largely intact, though the Magisterium is no longer a direct Catholic Church analogy” (2019). Daniel Fienberg of the *Hollywood Reporter*, on the other hand, described the series as “filled with nice visual realizations and occasionally interesting concepts and yet never even getting close to tackling Pullman’s crucial critique of organized religion or his approach to spirituality” (2019), while Sonia Saraiya, of *Vanity Fair* thought the approach to religion was “...flatter and more conventional than the book deserves” (2019). Alan Sepinwall, from the *Rolling Stone*, noted on how the series remain too vague about the role of the Magisterium in the day to day life of Lyra’s world, never clearly establishing the reach of their power. He also pointed out how the producers of the series “have gone out of their way to insist the show is not attacking any one religion, or even the idea of religion in general – no doubt because that’s bad for business” (2019). Sepinwall is referring to a number of promotional public statements made by executive producer Janet Tranter and screenwriter Jack Thorne, in which they claim that *His Dark Materials* interprets Pullman’s meaning as a spiritual fight against the abuse of power, not as critique of organized religion. This topic will be discussed further in the following chapters.

The critics also disagree considering the question of fidelity. While some find *His Dark Materials* to be an “intensely faithful adaptation” (Saraiya, 2019) others remain more sceptical. One of them is James Poniewozik whom in his review for the *New York Times* stated that: “Despite staying relatively faithful to the novel, ultimately the series is better at rendering the text’s imagery than capturing its tone” (2019). Kathryn VanArendonk, from the entertainment magazine *Vulture*, goes so far as to question the need for an adaptation at all, concluding that if neither film nor Tv-series is willing to fully explore the themes of Pullman’s work, perhaps that signifies that cinematic renditions of this story will always be excessive. “[You can] tell when an adaptation’s reason for being has been so sanded down and defanged and jumbled and depressurized that it now feels a little empty. This, sadly, is what’s happened to *His Dark Materials*” (2019). VanArendonk’s colleague, Devon Maloney, who wrote extensive singular reviews on every episode of the series, underlines her point by

referencing other adaptations that he believes successfully balances out staying faithful to their source material while adding something new. He also remarks on how removing parts of the story, even minor ones, quickly untangles the whole thing, leaving some elements without purpose. As an example of this he presents Lyra's arguable lack of personal growth as a result of the series' change in thematic focus, questioning whether it remains a coming-of-age story or if it has developed into something else completely.

This time around there appears to be an even greater concern over whether the series requires its audience to have prior knowledge of the novels, in fact, the majority of critics seem to agree that while the series provides enough exposition to overexplain and slow down the plot, it simultaneously fails to accommodate new audiences: "The series awkwardly pauses scenes to explain convoluted plots but remains hard to parse unless you've read the books, a cardinal sin for any adaptation" (Lawler, 2019). As someone who has not read the novel prior, Alan Sepinwall observes that the series leaves too many questions unanswered. He stresses that fantasy epics set in other worlds do not necessarily need to spell out every little detail right away, but for audiences to engage with a story there needs to be a certain level of clarity. As long as characters and conflicts are clearly defined, backstory and worldbuilding can come later. He believes *His Dark Materials* prioritizes establishing the lore of Lyra's world at the expense of more important elements, which ultimately makes the story feel thin. He also questions the timing of the exposition given in relation to particular story events:

Even the daemons, which should be the diversion from our reality that's easiest to grasp, aren't well-articulated [...] In one episode, Lyra is startled to encounter a daemon far away from its human, but the scene has no impact because the show waits until later to explain that hum daemons are always in close physical proximity. (Sepinwall, 2019)

The pacing of the story is another element frequently mentioned by the critics. More or less everyone seems to agree that Pullman's story benefits from the extended runtime it is given by the Tv-drama format. Audiences are allowed more breathing room which makes it easier to digest the philosophical themes (Poniewozik, 2019). Yet the medium form comes with a number of distinctive challenges. The nature of Tv-dramas, wherein the final product is composed of several episodes often written in part by different screenwriters and potentially directed by different people, makes the process of reviewing different from critiquing motion pictures. When elements like pacing and style can vary from episode to episode, judging the series as a whole may prove challenging. With the influx of digital reviews, contemporary critics have the opportunity to critique singular episodes as they air, allowing for more detailed reviews and giving room for opinions to change over time. *His Dark Materials* is

occasionally accused of progressing through the plot both too slowly and too fast, as “the plot somehow races along and moves like molasses at once, covering lots of ground while rarely stopping to invest in the whys or the emotional consequences” (Shoemaker, 2019). The most common complaint is that the first half of the series is rather uneventful, until one reaches the latter part where it picks up.

Surprisingly, some critics would compare the visual effects of *His Dark Materials* with those of the film (Lawler, 2019). As previously mentioned, the initial budgets for each adaptation were vastly different, not to mention the evolution that has happened in the field of animation and CGI in the scope of the last twelve years. Thus, such a comparison is both unfair and unsubstantiated. Considering the critical recognition and the awards *The Golden Compass* received for its visual effects, contemporary critics writing about how “bad” the computer animated bear looked back in 2007 stands out as an example of how audiences’ perception is coloured by time and popular opinion.

This time around, several of the critics do question what age-group the Tv-series is targeting. The atmosphere of *His Dark Materials* is described as dark and gritty, and while some critics present it as a show fit for the whole family, others caution that this is not a story for younger children. A few even make note of the duality of the novel, which is said to exist “in the borderland between children’s and adult fiction” (Poniewozik, 2019).

### **4.2.3 In hindsight**

The most significant observation to be made from this is how neither adaptation received overwhelmingly positive or negative reviews. Even if the professional reviewers are not necessarily representative of ordinary audiences, their reports suggest that neither adaptation can be written off as inherently terrible or a complete aesthetic failure. Keeping in mind how, at this point in time, none of the reviewers had any idea how either adaptation would be received by mass audiences, this strengthens my suspicion that much of the bad press *The Golden Compass* receives in contemporary media are somewhat affected by the hindsight knowledge of its commercial performance. It also demonstrates that *His Dark Materials* was not overly loved by critics, and that its success more often than not is measured in comparison to its predecessor, not solely based on its own merits.

Comparing the initial reviews of *The Golden Compass* with contemporary critiques written in hindsight there is a noticeable shift in attitude towards the film. Gone is the mix of positive and negative impressions, as well as any recollections of a flawed, but otherwise

enjoyable viewing experience. With titles like “The *One* Thing That Ruined *The Golden Compass* Movie” (Stefansky, 2019) or “THE GOLDEN COMPASS, a Failed Footnote in Fantasy Adaptations” (Brown, 2017) contemporary critics’ re-evaluations of the film appear predominantly negative, with the occasional sympathetic nod to those on the production team who wanted to make the film something more than it became. As expected, contemporary critics are eager to speculate about the exact reason for why the movie flopped. In the process they address some points of interest that went largely ignored by the initial reviewers, such as the film’s focus on children as a target demographic. The simplification of the original story’s rich lore and metaphysical aspects, supposedly in order to make the film appeal to a wider audience, is presented as a major factor:

A story about a young girl who falls headfirst into a quest to stop religious zealots from robbing children of their literal souls became a fantastical yarn of a young girl who rides in a bunch of boats and befriends giant bears and sees the whole thing as a grand adventure, more in line with 2005’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* than the more adult-oriented *The Fellowship of the Ring* movie. (Stefansky, 2019)

The reductions of the story’s darker elements are said to neuter the film’s uniqueness and identity, making it too childish for an adult audience to enjoy. Though the film is also criticized for not being a very good children’s movie as it “is one of those movies that taints other children’s films by virtue of being compromised by an adult’s idea of what children can cope with” (Blair, 2019). Scott Meslow from *GQ* posits that the novel trilogy was a hard sell to mainstream audiences, writing that the film visibly struggles with how to best handle the atheism themes. Ultimately, he too believes the compression of the story was what did the most harm:

*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* does an admirable job condensing the first part of J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy narrative into a single movie, but it’s still almost three hours long. At 114 minutes, *The Golden Compass* is nearly a full hour shorter than that, and it greatly suffers from the decision to condense a sprawling fantasy story into a film that’s not even as long as your average Judd Apatow comedy. (Meslow, 2019)

While a majority blames the film’s aesthetic contents, from complaints about its infidelities to claims that it was simply a boring slog of an experience, some contemporary critics do consider how contextual elements could have affected the movie’s reception. Andrew Blair, writing for *Den of Geek*, speculates that because *The Golden Compass* deals with concepts less familiar to audiences than wizards, elves and knights, it was more challenging to introduce it to new viewers than similar franchises such as *Harry Potter*. This correlates somewhat with how the previously mentioned stage play adaptation of Pullman’s work went to great lengths to assure its audience was familiarized with the concepts and worlds of the

story before watching the performance. Christian Holub from *Entertainment Weekly* wonders if the timing of *The Golden Compass*' release had an impact on its reception. The film was released at what was arguably the end of an era of otherworldly fantasy epics and at the threshold of what was soon to become the “golden age of superhero movies” in a Hollywood that was growing increasingly focused on pop-culture franchises. Holub also points out how he believes *The Golden Compass*, as a family film, missed out on the young adult audiences “that has dominated millennial pop culture nearly as much as superheroes” (Holub, 2017). Matt Brown, writing for the website *ScreenAnarchy*, remarks that no fantasy film coming out after *The Lord of the Rings* would have had the luxury of any semblance of anonymity. *The Golden Compass* was always going to be held up against the standards set in place by *The Lord of the Rings*, especially because of how New Line promoted it (Brown, 2017).

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Demographic Marketing

Producing movies in terms with market segmentation and demographic studies has been common practice in the US film industry since the 1950's. By dividing consumers into groups based on shared characteristics such as sex, education, and age, producers can identify and reach their potential customers more easily. Although there are issues with such simplification (some of which will be addressed in the following chapter) it has generally proved to be an efficient strategy for increasing profits (Staiger, 1992). This rings especially true for adaptation which has generally been considered a safe bet within the creative collaborative art fields as the works being adapted potentially come with an already established audience. In many cases of adaptation these knowing audiences become the primary target demographic (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 87). The intended target audience for a product is not always explicitly stated by the producer, but is suggested through a number of subtle, or not so subtle, signs and associations in a system similar to Hall's model of encoding and decoding. Contemporary consumers face market segmentation every day, both consciously and subconsciously, and through prolonged exposure have been taught to recognize which signs imply that a product is targeted towards them. Although I do agree with Staiger in that we should be careful with generalization when studying the individual reader's experience in meeting with a text and that the level of influence demographic marketing actually holds over consumer behaviour varies widely from person to person, it must be recognized as a contextual factor when addressing both the commercial performance and critical reception of a cinematic work.

The term "target audience" can cover any number of different demographics, but in this chapter, I will primarily be using it to discuss age-groups and audiences with a prior knowledge of Pullman's novels. Neither film- nor Tv-producer have specifically commented upon what age-groups they consider the ideal audiences for their respective products, but by analysing certain elements pertaining to each production we can draw conclusions based on observation. Both adaptations are repeatedly being categorized as family-fantasy-adventures by Tv guides and movie websites, though this is not necessarily within the producers' direct control. *The Golden Compass* premiered with a PG-13 rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, and a similar PG rating from the British Board of Film Classification who based their decision on the inclusion of "moderate fantasy violence and intense scenes." An American PG-13 rating stands for "Parents strongly cautioned: Some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers" (MPAA, 2020) while the British PG rating is somewhat more

lenient, reading: “Parental Guidance: General viewing, but some scenes may be unsuitable for young children. A PG film should not unsettle a child aged around eight or older” (BBFC, 2020). The British Board of Film Classification does have a “suitable for 12 years and over” rating available, which they chose not to use. Similarly, the Motion Picture Association of America does have a milder version of the PG-13 rating geared more towards general audiences. Thus, it appears there was a discourse in what each board considered the ideal audience for the film. It should be noted that neither rating functions as an enforced restriction, but rather as guidelines for parents. In the UK, *His Dark Materials* aired on BBC One at 8PM, suggesting it is suitable for children as BBC has a well-established policy of not airing anything lewd, violent or otherwise adult-oriented before 9PM (BBC, 2020). Still, the relatively late timeslot does imply that the show is not meant for the youngest children. HBO gave the show an internal rating of TV-14, meaning it contains scenes and themes that might be upsetting to children under the age of 14. The ratings somewhat resemble those of the film and yet again there is a tendency for greater leniency in the UK, supporting the notion that there exists some cultural difference in the customs for rating cinematic texts.

The film adaptation contains noticeably toned-down levels of violence and death compared to the novel. Examples of this is how both Roger and Billy Costa survive until the end of the movie or Lyra’s hopeful closing statement about how they will find a way to fix the children that have had their dæmons removed. Despite featuring weapons and relatively sized battles, the film remains fairly bloodless, its only true indicator of death being people’s dæmons dissolving in small puffs of golden dust. The only visually explicit scene is the fight between the two would-be-king polar bears, in which the antagonistic bear is killed. The Tv-series is more direct in its handling of darker themes, including depictions of child-death and scenes of romantic sensuality (albeit very mild), as well as domestic and psychological abuse. A lot of the would-be graphic violence is toned down somewhat through the fantasy elements, such as the murder of a young journalist at the end of episode 2 “The Idea of North”. The woman gets into a car with Lord Boreal, a man of the church, mid-conversation he catches her butterfly-dæmon in his hand and crushes it, next to him the journalist slumps together dead. The scene both establishes Boreal as a villain and demonstrates the internal rules of the Tv-series’ universe; humans and dæmons are interconnected, if either one is harmed, both will die.

It can be speculated that the nature and renown of HBO as a channel is affecting how audiences perceive what they should expect from *His Dark Materials*. Home to explicit shows such as *True Blood* (2008–2014), *Euphoria* (2019–Present) and the vastly popular *Game of*

*Thrones* (2011–2019), the channel has become notorious for its liberal restrictions on the depiction of nudity and graphic violence. Several critics even made passing reference to *Game of Thrones* in their reviews, not really comparing its contents with *His Dark Materials*, but to underline their impression of the series' darker aesthetics and atmosphere. Thus, potential spectators would be excused for assuming the show is indented for more mature audiences.

The general production design of each adaptation also signifies something about their intended target audiences, though the subjective nature of aesthetics makes it hard to draw any absolute conclusions. One of the greatest visual differences between the two is the balance between fantastical and realistic elements. This is particularly visible in the depiction of the technology and machinery of Lyra's world. *The Golden Compass* features a collection of extraordinary and otherworldly devices, somewhat resembling real-life inventions, but with an art deco steampunk twist. Examples of this are the "anbaric car" that Lyra rides when she first visits London, the design of the world's zeppelins and Lee Scoresby's hot air balloon. *His Dark Materials* sticks much closer to reality, featuring normal 50's style cars, plausible zeppelins and balloons. While these examples do not signify an intended target audience directly, they demonstrate the general approach of each adaptation; magical wonder vs alternative realism. For the interior of the science facility *Bolvangar*, where the church carries out their experiments on children, the creators of *His Dark Materials* brought in actual cold war era apparatus, which combined with strong fluorescent lights makes the building resemble a claustrophobic underground bunker. The *Bolvangar* of *The Golden Compass* is still uncomfortable, but with its large, well-lit rooms, coloured walls and gilded metal doors it has a more artificial, sterilized feel to it. Even the Alethiometer, the golden compass itself, has a distinctively more magical appearance in the film adaptation compared to the modest, practical version presented in the Tv-series. The depictions of dæmons also fall in line with this reasoning. Presumably due to its budget limitations, the *His Dark Materials*' creators have opted not to show people's dæmons at all times. It is explained that smaller dæmons normally will be kept in pockets or otherwise out of sight, only emerging when they are needed. While this is a perfectly acceptable rationalisation, it does somewhat reduce one of the most obvious otherworldly elements of Lyra's reality. *The Golden Compass* has a greater abundance of critters walking along next to their humans, not really serving any other purpose than as a reminder that this is not our universe. It is, of course, entirely possible to create a piece of media with great focus on the magical and strange intended for adults and so these approaches to production design are not necessarily telling in and of themselves. Yet,

considered in combination with other production elements, the overall design and tone of *The Golden Compass* arguably prioritizes exploration and adventure, while *His Dark Materials* invests more in creating a sense of mystery and in the psychology of characters. These are genre traits commonly associated with specific age demographics.

The apparent divergence in what age-group the producers of each adaptation have chosen to focus on correlates with the confusion the novel has caused in bookstores and libraries, as no one seems to truly know which shelf to place it on. *Northern Lights* and its sequels are simultaneously being marketed for preteens, as a children's story, as young adult fiction, and as fantasy fit for adults. In interviews Pullman has admitted that he does not write with any particular age-group or audience in mind. According to him, the fact *Northern Lights* was marketed to children had more to do with practicalities and the publisher than with the story itself, which in turn meant the book ended up in the children's section of bookstores, possibly misleading people in terms of what they should expect. He also notes that when he attends public or promotional events, his audience is made up almost entirely of adults (Schwartz, 2019). None of this is surprising, considering Pullman's previously stated political stance against age restrictions and demographic marketing in literature. On one hand, *Northern Lights* features a preteen protagonist, talking animals, witches and magic, all elements that are frequently associated with novels written for younger readers. Yet the majority of young children will presumably not have any knowledge of Milton's *Paradise Lost* or its connection to *Genesis*, nor the correlation between Dust and the scientific concept of dark matter. These readers probably care less about the underlying religious and political conflicts than they do about Lyra's quest to find her friend or figuring out what their own magical spirit-animal would be. My intention here is not to generalize children as simplistic or incapable of understanding complex stories, but rather to underline how designating a given target audience for the novel (and by extension its adaptations) poses a challenge. Children are part of the "fans of the novel" demographic, but they are not the only ones.

Seeing how one of the most commented elements in reviews of the film adaptation was the altered or lacking religious criticism, this raises the question who are the critics writing for? I strongly believe that a general child audience would not enjoy the film more if it had increased levels of anti-religious themes or explored deep questions of a philosophical nature. There might be a way to rewrite or otherwise tailor the story to introduce these elements to a child audience in an accessible way, but only to a certain degree. To fully understand the subtext and themes of the novel, prior knowledge and experience is required and it is simply not reasonable to expect audiences of a certain age to be equipped with such.

Considering the textual meaning of the novel from a context-activated point of view, it would not be unreasonable to speculate that many of Pullman's readers who cherished his work in their childhood, return to his stories as adults experiencing them in a completely different way. At least this was my personal experience, reading the novels both as a preteen and again as an adult with a degree in literature. *Northern Lights* demonstrates one of the issues with categorization as a system, and it makes pinpointing an age demographic for marketing its adaptations troublesome.

With all of this in mind, we begin to see the conundrum facing those who set out to adapt Pullman's work. *Northern Lights* may be a novel fit for all ages, but the contemporary conventional film and Tv industry is built upon the concept of genres and tropes. The problem with making an adaptation for "fans of the novel" is that this is very far from a homogenous group and there is no certain way to predict which elements of the story "fans" perceive as the most important. Here we see a clear demonstration of why Hutcheon deems the idea of "fidelity to spirit" in adaptation as a concept too subjective to be of use (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 10). For one fan, the anti-religious subtext may be the most essential, for another the heart of the novel is the coming-of-age-story of a girl discovering who she is. These are overlapping, but not inseparable.

If we accept the proposition that *The Golden Compass* was deliberately marketed towards a target demographic of children below 13 years, and that *His Dark Materials* was equally intended for teens or adults, this leaves us with the question: Does it matter? How do the signs suggesting what audiences the adaptations are intended for potentially influence their receptions? As previously mentioned, one of the most attractive features of adaptation for creators is the potential of pre-established audiences, but as stated by both Leitch and Hutcheon, these customers do not come for free. By openly announcing their film as "based on" a specific prior work, the adapters give room for certain assumptions and encourage audiences to include their foreknowledge of the source text in their horizons of expectation, essentially giving themselves less creative freedom than they would have on a project without such intertextual connections (p. 121). I speculate that instead of attempting to appease too wide of an audience, made up of several demographics, New Line opted for selling *The Golden Compass* as a children's' movie and in doing so neglected the largest part of their potential knowing audiences. Even if we choose to consider *Northern Lights* a children's novel, the fact that it was published in 1995, means that any preteen who read the novel when it first came out would be in their twenties by the time the film adaptation was released. Thus, we can assume that the majority of people who have read the novel are no longer children and

that they might revisit the story with a wish for a different experience. Based on the critics many comments about the lack of depth in the film and the reduction of the story's more dark and mature meanings, adult audiences might equally have felt something was missing. That is if the adult fans of the novel went to see the film in cinemas at all. For market segmentation to function as intended, the producer needs to communicate the nature of their product clearly enough for the target audience to recognize and identify with it (Staiger, 1992, p. 75). There is also a risk of a product becoming so strongly associated with a certain demographic that other potential customer groups reject it. Adult fans of the novel could very well pass on the film adaptation simply because they perceived it as being overly geared towards children, just as fans of Pullman's anti-religious philosophy may be turned off by promotional statements claiming the film will avoid depicting the Catholic church as the villain.

## 5.2 Expectation and Intertextuality

To gain a better understanding of what expectations audiences might have had walking into cinemas back in December 2007, we need to consider *The Golden Compass*' promotional materials, as well as the nature of its genre predecessors. At this point in time the *Harry Potter* craze was at its height, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* had just been a great success and it was only a couple of years since New Line had finished their vastly popular *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. A number of critics made various comparisons to *The Lord of the Rings* in their reviews of *The Golden Compass*, not a fair comparison perhaps, but an expected one. Not only was *The Lord of the Rings* the flagship of New Line Cinema, the studio went out of their way to make the comparison themselves. The best example of this is how one of the theatrical trailers for *The Golden Compass* opens with an image of *the one ring*, the most iconic image from *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, slowly transforming into the Alethiometer accompanied by the words: "In 2001 New Line Cinema opened the doors to *Middle-earth*. This December they take you on another epic journey." Already, there is a disconnect in the signalling of who is the intended target audience for this new film, as well as another demonstration of how the systems used for rating the age appropriateness of films are flawed. *The Golden Compass* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy share the same PG-rating. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first film in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, was arguably one of the most violent PG-13 rated movies ever made at the time of its release. Intense battle scenes, death, blood and monsters all feature heavily in these films. In *Return of the King*, the third instalment in the trilogy, the adversaries attempt to install fear in

the heroes by catapulting the decapitated heads of their fallen comrades over the city walls they are trying to defend. It is a stark contrast to the bloodless fighting of *The Golden Compass*, where major character deaths from the novel have been replaced and softened to uphold a more hopeful atmosphere. Violence aside, *The Lord of the Rings* explores complex themes of war and politics, often through quizzical and complicated dialogue, features commonly associated with films aimed at mature audiences. Considering the trailers from a market segmentation perspective, I interpret this as New Line simultaneously trying to sell their new film to the adult audiences of their previous franchise and as a children's movie.

My impression of the studio's lack of direction in their promotion of the film is strengthened by the theatrical trailers' vague communication of what the plot is about. The shorter trailers give very sparse information. They focus on the character of Lyra, the journey north and the idea of prophecy, but no goal or story is ever made even remotely clear. The longest trailer on the other hand, ends up giving too much information at once. It opens with a voice-over explanation of the general workings of Lyra's world and goes on to show how the Magisterium is evil and wants to control everyone, Asriel investigates a parallel universe, children are being kidnapped, Mrs Coulter is the one kidnapping them, Robert is kidnapped, Mrs Coulter wants Lyra to travel with her, Lyra is the child of prophecy, Lyra must keep the alethiometer secret, Lyra must hire an armoured polar bear, Lyra travels with gypsies and war is coming. By comparison, the trailers promoting *His Dark Materials* are a lot more specific in their presentation of the core plot: Lyra is searching for the missing children, the alethiometer can help, but there are bad people who want to take it from her. The trailers also give a clearer implication about the producers' intended target audiences and what spectators can expect from the series through images such as Mrs Coulter caressing a gun.

While on the topic of expectations, I believe it is important not to overlook the creators of the film adaptation as they too have their own horizons of expectation. The producers' interpretations of their film's commercial performance as a "success" or "failure" largely depend on the specifics of these horizons, which are constructed based on intertextual influences. To demonstrate my point, I wish to present another comparison: The first film of the J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot (2009), a special effects heavy blockbuster movie with a production budget of around \$150 000 000, only grossed for about \$385 000 000 worldwide. Despite this figure being almost the same as the final sum *The Golden Compass* produced, *Star Trek* was considered a commercial success, to be promptly followed by two sequels. While there could be any number of reasons why either film was perceived as they were at the time, two major differences stand out: Namely domestic performance and the producers'

standard for expectation. Each film had about the same final worldwide grossing, but *Star Trek* performed better domestically with only about 30% of its revenue coming from abroad. *The Golden Compass* on the other hand, got more than 80% of its total revenue from countries other than the US. Note that because I do not have access to the details of the contracts New Line signed when they sold the foreign distribution rights to their film, I will bypass this point in my speculations. The Hollywood of the mid to late 2000s predominantly evaluated films' financial potential and shareholder outlook based on domestic performance, thus it can be argued that the timing of *The Golden Compass*' release was somewhat ill-conceived. I have been unable to find any precise numbers for book sales in either country, but all my sources unanimously agree that Pullman has a greater following in the UK than in the US. Thus, I question the decision to launch *The Golden Compass* as an American project and the emphasis put on its poor domestic performance, as I believe this essentially ignores the core body of its pre-established fanbase. As for producer expectation, despite its arguably low revenue compared to other high-profile films in its genre, the 2009 *Star Trek* movie was the highest-grossing film of its franchise. Since it was the latest in a long line of related films, its producers had something to measure it up against and could adjust their expectations accordingly. The low international grossing did not affect the producers' perception of the film as successful, because they already knew their franchise as a whole had never been overly popular abroad. Meanwhile, New Line were open about their expectations for *The Golden Compass* to follow in the wake of *The Lord of the Rings* and for it to become the next big thing in fantasy, essentially setting themselves up for failure.

I cannot help but wonder if the existence of *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* was somewhat detrimental to *The Golden Compass* in that they set the stage for what was to be expected from a fantasy film adaptation aimed at children and young teens. The themes of these movies, with their rather straightforward good vs evil plotlines, are arguably easier to adapt for a wide audience than the morally grey world and philosophic musings of Pullman's novels. On the other hand, as the studio behind *The Lord of the Rings*, New Line presumably was aware that a fantasy film made for older audiences could be a potential goldmine. As previously noted, I question the filmmakers' decision to make *The Golden Compass* a children's movie because I believe doing so neglected the majority of the novel's fanbase. That being said, I also believe the film was somewhat unfairly judged in that it, in many cases, appears to have been evaluated purely as an adaptation of the novel, not as a film in its own right. I base this claim on the observation that some of the loudest critics were knowing audiences who felt strongly about changes and simplifications, while the most

positive reviews predominantly came from unknowing spectators who arguably saw the film for what it was, rather than what it could or should have been. Alternatively put, the positive reviewers accepted the creators preferred reading of the film as an inoffensive children's adventure movie, while the knowing audiences opposed a reading that did not fit with their preconceptions based on the novel. In this context, I have asked myself if New Line attempted to sell the film as something other than what it was, but apart from the inaccurate comparison to *The Lord of the Rings*, I do not think they did. Although the theatrical trailers arguably fail to clearly communicate the direction of the story, they very much signify the film as targeted towards younger viewers.

### 5.3 Religion and controversy

When asked why the film adaptation of his novel never got any sequels, Pullman has repeatedly named bad publicity, religious resistance and organized boycott as the reasons. In a 2019 interview with *The New Yorker* he said:

[...] the film met such resistance – in the United States especially – that [New Line] decided that they'd better cut and run before they lost any more money. There was a lot of religious opposition to it, whipped up by a body called the Catholic League, among other people. And I think the studio just got nervous. There was no need for them to get nervous, but they did. (Schwartz, 2019)

Actor Sam Elliott has also publicly voiced his frustration over the role he believes the Catholic church played in sealing the potential trilogy's fate and "scaring off" the producers (Adams, 2009). Shortly after it was publicly announced that all planned sequels for *The Golden Compass* had been cancelled, several news outlets ran with headlines proclaiming that "The film was stopped by an organized Catholic boycott" (Gran, 2011).

The "Catholic boycott" in question is referring to a campaign run by the relatively marginal group the *Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights* and its leader, William A. Donohue. The Catholic church itself has never been officially involved in any organized boycott or other campaigns against the film, although the Vatican did publicly condemn it on the grounds that it supposedly depicts a cold and hopeless world without God that no "honest" viewer would enjoy (Pullella, 2007). The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights was formed in 1973 with the purpose of defending Catholics' right to participate in American public life and to fight religious discrimination against Catholics. The organization claims to be the largest Catholic civil rights organization in the US, but official membership numbers are scarce, making it hard to accurately estimate the group's size. The most commonly used numbers stem from 1999, when the League claimed to have about 350.000 members, but as

there is no evidence to back up these claims and considering the lack of more recent numbers, the League's critics posit that it is unlikely that they carry this kind of influence (Hu, 1999; Americans United, 2015). The Catholic League had been targeting films for years, utilizing written media and talk shows to gain publicity and provoke controversy. Months before *The Golden Compass* were to release, the Catholic League began campaigning through its website, warning potential movie-goers against the dangers of Pullman's writing and his alleged desire to kill God. A 30-page brochure titled "The Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked" was published and distributed to schools, media sites and other religious groups. Despite New Line's reassurances that their adaptation would not vilify the Catholic church, Donohue proclaimed that the film would undoubtedly lead to children picking up Pullman's novels and thus be exposed to "a recipe for atheism" (Malone, 2009, p. 66-67). The Catholic League eventually reached *Focus on the Family*, a Christian moral activist organization that, among other things, reviews films and books for an audience of approximately 5 million. This could potentially have hurt the film, although the group's previous protests against TV-shows and other media such as the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* or the 2004 film *Kinsey*, did little to affect viewership (Piccalo, 2007). The Catholic League's activism may have been enough to spook some Catholics and Christians, but the question remains of how many people involved with these kinds of groups would watch the film in cinemas in the first place. Considering the Catholic League's relatively small size and the possibility that the activists were simply preaching to an echo chamber, is it plausible that they had enough influence to affect the film's domestic commercial performance as much as they presumably did? Especially considering how the Catholic League ran similar campaigns against films such as *The da Vinci Code* (2006) and the *Harry Potter*-series (2001–2011), without it making any noticeable impact on their box office numbers, though it should be mentioned that both of these novels had a much larger following in the US prior to their film adaptations than Pullman's books ever had (Marikar, 2009). However, this did not stop the Catholic League from claiming credit when the cancellation of the remaining Pullman adaptations was announced. Donohue told the *Evening Standard* that he was "delighted that the boycott worked" saying: "I knew if we could hurt the box office receipts here, it might put the brakes on the next movie" (Adams, 2009).

It is important to emphasize that the Catholic League and Donohue himself have many critics, also among other Catholic organizations (Feuerherd, 2010). Peter Malone, former World President of the International Catholic Organization for Cinema (OCIC) and its successor SIGNIS, had this to say about the Catholic League's efforts:

This kind of scaremongering crusade finds little official favour in the Catholic Church except when unsolicited material is taken on face value. This is polemic which reinforces stances rather than a dialogue which seeks some meeting of minds and hearts. It also indicated an attitude that adult Catholics are not able to deal intelligently with challenges to their faith and may be easily prone to lose it. (Malone, 2009, p. 66–67)

Other religious organizations, such as the US Conference of Catholic Bishops endorsed *The Golden Compass* as they believed most audiences would “scarcely be aware of the religious connotations” (Piccalo, 2007), while the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, praised Pullman for taking the church “seriously” and bringing theological questions into the mainstream (Adams, 2009). According to Malone, films facing difficulties in the US due to religious controversy is nothing new. Judging from a sample of US controversies and how they were handled by the church, he concludes that historically, Catholics would not take to the streets to publicly voice their dismay with a film: “Ordinarily, the reaction in the United States was to impose an Objectionable or a Condemned rating from the Legion of Decency” (Malone, 2009, p. 64). To demonstrate the diverse nature of Catholics as a group, Malone uses the film *Life of Brian* (1979), which met great resistance and protests in North America. The film was given an O, Offensive rating by the US bishops conference who accused it of deliberately exploiting sacred religious traditions for comedic relief. Meanwhile, the director of the Australian Catholic Film Office, Father Fred Chamberlin, reportedly “laughed unashamedly” when he went to see the film, a reaction that seemingly corresponded with that of the majority of Australian Catholics at the time. Malone believes this “seems to indicate that some “moral stances” are really “sensitivity stances,” even differences in senses of humour, and that it is dangerous to generalize about Catholic responses to particular films” (p. 65).

The enmity between Pullman and his critics is nothing new: He was ranked second on the American Library Association’s 2008 list over books that people have tried to ban across America and in 2007 religious publisher *Ignatius* published a book named “Pied Piper of Atheism: Phillip Pullman and Children’s Fantasy” (Pilkington, 2009; Brekke, 2007). Pullman has seemingly embraced the brand of “most dangerous author in Britain”. Four years before the film adaptation’s turbulent release, he even told *The Sydney Morning Herald* how he wondered why his novels hadn’t attracted as much controversy as J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series: “[I’m] saying things that are far more subversive than anything poor old Harry has said. My books are about killing God” (Rosin, 2007). He has repeatedly expressed an understanding of the potential repercussions his renown might provoke for the reception of the cinematic adaptations of his work. Officially, he had the title of executive producer on the

film, but apart from reading and occasionally commenting on scripts, he says he actively tried to keep his distance to the project, acknowledging that his job now was to be “sensible” so that the next two films got made (Schwartz, 2019).

## 5.4 Media coverage

In promotional interviews Chris Weitz, screenwriter and director of *The Golden Compass*, explained that he understands Pullman’s novels as a criticism of the utilization of religion to abuse power in politics, not as an attack on contemporary Catholicism whose church has not functioned as a political organization since medieval times. New Line worked actively to avoid promoting the film with any sort of focus on Pullman’s philosophies or the religious themes of the novels and would not address the accusations raised by the Catholic League. Their only response was a singular statement from the studio’s president of theatrical marketing, Chris Carlisle, who assured the film would be “an exciting fantasy adventure film that we believe families will enjoy” (Piccalo, 2007). Sam Elliott and co-actor Eva Green later spoke to journalists about the way both cast and crew were specifically instructed to avoid the topic of religion and to “play dumb” when questioned about it during any public event or interview associated with the film (Thorkildsen, 2007). There seems to be a consensus among reviewers and the film’s opponents alike, that in terms of theology and religion the finalized product was inoffensive and relatively harmless. Even Donohue admitted, in a 2007 interview with *Fox News*, that the final version of the film was not at all bad (Gran, 2011).

I believe the overall media coverage, both before and after the film was released, played a significant part in shaping its reception. Since New Line commissioned the first script in 2002, *The Golden Compass* went through a number of changes in how it would address the anti-religious themes of the novel, especially how it would portray the villains of the story. Toby Emmerich, New Line’s president of production, described the studio’s vision of the Magisterium as “vaguely kind of like a fascistic, totalitarian dictatorship, Russian/KGB/SS” organization. The film was angled to focus more on Lyra and the prophecy about her, and less on the politics of her world. The first screenplay attempt was written by Tom Stoppard in 2003. His script reportedly stays relatively faithful to the novels, with the clergyman Father MacPhail, a character whom is sent by the church to kill Lyra in the later books, as the main face of the villains. Ultimately, New Line is said to have found the script to be “too intellectual,” with too little focus on Lyra, and thus Chris Weitz was brought in as the new writer. In an interview with the fan-site *bridgetothestarts.net* back in 2004, Weitz was

questioned about the more controversial aspects of Pullman's novels. He admitted that New Line had "expressed worry about the possibility of [*His Dark Materials*'] perceived anti-religiosity making it an unviable project financially," but assured that he would do his utmost to preserve the liberal and iconic spirit of the source material, even if moderations had to be made (Rosin, 2007). Unfortunately for Weitz these early comments were not well received by fans. Weitz and the studio believed that their take on the religious aspects of the novel – and the presentation of the Magisterium as an oppressive, totalitarian theocracy - was rather safe and shared by the majority of Pullman's readers. He was not prepared to face the loudest part of the novel's fan-base, whom demanded complete fidelity to the books' presentation of God as the villain and who would reportedly dedicate significant time and effort into tracking every slight deviation in the screenplay (Piccalo, 2007). Shortly after his interview with *bridgetothestars.net*, *The Times* ran a story with the headline "God is Cut from Film of Dark Materials" (Coates, 2004). The backlash was even greater once it became known that the film would not include the book's final cliff-hanger chapters, pushing them into the beginning of the planned sequel in favour of a more feelgood ending. The reactions to his interview were apparently intense enough to make Weitz doubt his ability to helm the project. Overwhelmed by the pressure of expectation he backed out, leaving his role as director, but remaining as screenwriter. The director job was temporarily filled by Anand Tucker, whom then quit less than a year later due to "creative differences" with the studio. Weitz was persuaded to return as director and the production of the film continued as scheduled.

It was not just Pullman's critics and religious groups that were publishing writings about the film before it released. Online fans were despairing over the rumoured cuts and changes, with some going so far as to declare the film "dead" and vowing not to see it. Entertainment news outlets ran with headlines like "Does *The Golden Compass* Point to Hell?" "The Church vs the cinema: Philip Pullman's blasphemous materials?" and "Philip Pullman film stripped of religious themes," all the while greatly emphasising how: "All this leaves New Line in a precarious spot, trying to please fans who relish Pullman's philosophical and theological puzzles without alienating the very bankable Christian masses" (Piccalo, 2007). It could be argued that all press is good press, after all religious controversy did not seem to affect the commercial performance of similar films. Yet I speculate that the pre-release media presentation of *The Golden Compass* as a tug-of-war between "fans" and "the religious" was damaging. Especially because the film, depending on who wrote about it, was simultaneously reported to be anti-religion *and* to be altering the story to pander to religious viewers. While I don't necessarily believe this media-presentation alone is enough to explain

the film's relatively low grossing, I do think it enhanced the disappointment felt by the more hardcore fans of the novel, ultimately contributing to the film's poor renown.

Pullman's more official supporters were also sceptical towards the film. Britain's National Secular Society (of which Philip Pullman is an honorary member) were vocal about their dismay with the film's handling of the books both before and after it was released. On the day the film premiered Terry Sanderson, president of the society, commented:

We knew from the beginning that the producers of this film intended to leave out the anti-religious references. We think it is a great shame - the fight against the Magisterium (Pullman's thinly disguised version of the Catholic Church) - is the whole point of the book. Take that away and the most original and interesting element of the story is lost. (Sanderson, 2007)

He compared the film to other controversial movies such as *Harry Potter* and *The da Vinci Code*, proclaiming that the objections from the Catholic League was never with the film itself but rather with the author of its source material. Describing the league's previous boycotts as "flops" he went on to say:

The American audiences are portrayed as very conservative when it comes to religious matters, but I think they would have coped with Pullman's pop at authoritarian religion. Certainly British audiences would. When the same books were dramatized at the National Theatre in London every performance was sold out and no parent thought it beyond the wit of their child to deal with the themes of a fight against sinister religious power. (Sanderson, 2007)

I posit that the bad press spread by Pullman's supporters or neutral sources was far more damaging to the film than any slander spread by his opponents. The campaigning of the Catholic League could presumably only work on those potential audiences who were unaware of Pullman and his novels. Meanwhile, the statements from Sanderson or the word of mouth from other disappointed fans could potentially sway those who were supposed to be the pre-established audience for the movie.

In December 2007, Hanna Rosin wrote an extensive article for *The Atlantic*, dissecting the film and its production (based on several versions of the shooting script, as she was not allowed to watch the movie before its release). Rosin depicts a troubled production period and a studio plagued with discourse and creative differences. She interviewed Chris Weitz, quoting his complaints about how the film turned out and how much of the internal logic and worldbuilding that was lost in the final product:

It may make sense if you're in a dark room dazzled by special effects and not thinking too hard. Then again, maybe it won't. What's left of Pullman's story is as string of disconnected proclamations that obscure not just his original point, but any point at all... (Rosin, 2007)

Shortly after Rosin published her work, Weitz wrote an open letter to the editor in which he claimed to have been misquoted and expressed great frustration over the depiction of him “selling out” to appease religious audiences. He accused Rosin of misrepresenting both the film and himself through her “carefully cut-and-pasted quotes and surmises pumped up with paraphrase” concluding that: “It has been an interesting experience to be accused, in the same month, of forwarding the aims of a stealth-atheist conspiracy and of selling out the secular ideals of a great work of literature” (Weitz, 2008). However, other entertainment news outlets have later published similar interviews with Weitz, again portraying his regrets and complaints about the restrictions put upon the film production by the higher ups in the studio. Whether Weitz was misquoted by Rosin or not, the story of the studio’s internal discord and the film adaptation’s troubled production lives on in contemporary recollections of *The Golden Compass*.

Interestingly, the *His Dark Materials* producers’ handling of the press and potential religious controversy has seemingly been similar to New Line’s approach, yet with almost no backlash. During a promotional panel at San Diego Comic Con Janet Tranter, executive producer for *His Dark Materials*, explained why the series is not an attack on religion:

Philip Pullman, in these books, is not attacking belief, is not attacking faith, not attacking religion or the church per se. He’s attacking a particular form of control where there is a very deliberate attempt to withhold information, keep people in the dark, and not allow ideas and thinking to be free.  
(Harrison, 2019)

She claimed that Pullman does not target any specific contemporary religion, despite the somewhat overwhelming evidence that his novels are a very deliberate attack on both Christianity and the Catholic Church. Not only do they contain excerpts and quotes from *Genesis* and *Paradise Lost*, already by page 31 is it established that the church of Lyra’s world believes in one God, one heaven, one hell, and is led by a pope (Pullman, p. 31). Biblical figures like Adam and Eve are frequently mentioned, so are Christian angels such as Gabriel and Metatron, and by the third novel Pullman is unapologetically referencing the multiple names for “God” found in the *Old Testament* (*The Amber Spyglass*, p. 31). Tranter also claimed that the religious controversy of 2007 was directed solely at the film adaptation and had little to do with the novels themselves. A statement that directly contradicts what Donohue and the Catholic League themselves told journalists. It is my impression that the producers of the Tv-adaptation use *The Golden Compass* as somewhat of a media scapegoat. By associating the controversy with the film, they can distance it from their own adaptation and simultaneously use it to promote themselves by assuring fans that they will not be making

the same mistakes New Line did. This approach has seemingly been somewhat supported by the media, with more papers running stories on how the series will fix the missteps of its predecessor or how it will embrace the controversy and dark spirit of its source material. There also appears to have been less of a religious outcry in response to the Tv-series, possibly a result of the shift in signified target demographic. Or maybe the potential audiences of 2019 were somewhat more acclimatised to religious controversy in their cinematic media. Perhaps after Tv-series like *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and *A Handmaid's Tale* (2017–Present), *His Dark Materials* no longer feels as threatening.

## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have studied the film adaptation *The Golden Compass* and some of the circumstances that framed its reception by focusing on intertextual and paratextual elements. Inspired by Simone Murray's socioeconomic approach to adaptation theory and Janet Staiger's context-activated reception studies, I examined the film as a case study through its promotional material and media presentation. Using Staiger's historical materialistic method as a basis for my research, I read and compared professional reviews from the time of the film's release. I also studied reviews of *His Dark Materials*, a Tv-adaptation based on the same literary source material, as well as writings by contemporary critics. The observations I made upon studying the reviews form the foundation for my following speculations. Considering interviews, entertainment news reports and similar official writings, I addressed various contextual elements, discussing how they could have potentially influenced *The Golden Compass*' reception. I have also made several comparisons to other American films from the same time period.

While my results are not conclusive, I have been able to make certain observations. By comparing the adaptation's domestic and international commercial performance and box office numbers to those of similar films, it becomes apparent that *The Golden Compass* did relatively well outside of the United States. Its commercial failure is defined by three detrimental factors; the high production budget, the producer's equally high expectations and the industry's focus on domestic performance. The high production costs not only made financial losses more likely, but presumably also contributed to the film's curiously short runtime, which meant more of the story content had to be cut. Encouraged by their recent success with *The Lord of the Rings* and the popularity of other fantasy film adaptations for children, *The Golden Compass*' performance was compared to the giants of the genre, despite not having the same fan-following and general popularity. Having sold off the foreign distribution rights to the film before it was released, the studio depended on a high domestic grossing that never came to fruition.

Studying the reviews, I concluded that the critics mostly prioritized the same elements, regardless of nationality. The majority was not too concerned with textual fidelity to the adaptation's source material, yet there was a tendency for evaluating the film as an adaptation rather than a film in its own right. Those who announced themselves to be knowing audiences appeared to be more disappointed with the film overall, but these numbers were too low to draw any sufficient conclusion. In my opinion, the biggest takeaway observation to be made

from the reviews was that *The Golden Compass* was not unanimously depreciated by the initial reviewers. It received a mixed critical reception, generally receiving mediocre to average scores. This strengthens my suspicion that the way the film has come to be portrayed in contemporary media is somewhat coloured by the hindsight knowledge of its commercial shortcomings.

The most apparent difference between *The Golden Compass* and *His Dark Materials* are their approaches to demographic marketing and implied target audiences. *The Golden Compass* was intended as a children's adventure movie, a choice that came with a set of restrictions, which may have alienated potential adult audiences. If I were to be as absurd as to point out which *one* singular element I believe hurt *The Golden Compass* the most, I would refer to Pullman's political stance against demographic marketing in literature and how the film studio attempted to make an age-specific film from a novel intended to live outside the boundaries of such classifications. The novel's pre-established fanbase was not predominantly made up of children.

I questioned how religious resistance and organized boycotting potentially affected the film's reception, ultimately concluding that the religiously motivated criticism by itself probably did little damage to the film. The protesters were a rather marginal group that, despite reportedly having a reach of over five million Americans, would not have been able to directly cause the film's poor domestic ticket sales. However, I speculate that the media presentation of how the film studio was "selling out" to appease religious audiences potentially could have had greater repercussions. Similarly, so would negative critiques and writings published by Pullman's supporters and fans of the novel.

*Northern Lights* and its sequels are undoubtedly challenging novels to adapt. Considering everything that has been addressed, the question remains if there was anything New Line could have done differently to potentially salvage the film. While I do believe that if the studio had been more aware of the potential pre-established audience that came with Pullman's novels, *The Golden Compass* might have been remembered differently today, I also think the answer to this question is made up of too many variables to ever be properly answered.

The type of case study carried out in this thesis can be important because it provides a way to examine works that would otherwise be inaccessible. It is impossible to know the exact personal reasons for why individual audiences initially chose, or never even considered, watching *The Golden Compass* in cinemas. Thus, reviews, promotional materials and production details remain some of the only sources still available that can tell us something

about the film's reception outside of the textual meanings and aesthetic contents. For creators and distributors of adaptations studies of this kind may be of practical value since a better understanding of the receptions of past productions help contribute to predictions and decisions regarding how to best promote new cinematic texts. My chosen method has proved useful, first and foremost by highlighting the variations in the relationships between producers and audiences that exist prior to a work's release. However, while focusing on a limited set of factors has been helpful to gain more specific information, my approach has left many questions unanswered. The greatest of which is why the film adaptation did so poorly within the United States compared to the rest of the world. If the low domestic sales were not the direct result of religious controversy, what caused them? To study this further, I would start by seeking a better understanding of the popularity and reach of Pullman's novels in different countries based on sales numbers, although this may prove a challenge as I, so far, have been unable to find any reliable sources for such information. It would also be of interest to carry out a full comparative study of the aesthetic contents of *The Golden Compass* and *His Dark Materials* to potentially evaluate the different creative choices made by each adapter and how this potentially could have influenced reception. A study of this kind would presumably strengthen some of the findings of this thesis. Finally, looking past the borders of context-activated reception, I would attempt to approach *The Golden Compass* as an empirical study to test my hypothesis that the film was aimed towards children and that most of the negativity surrounding it stems from adult audiences. Since I cannot test the children of the past, I would present the film to contemporary child audiences, preferably both unknowing and knowing, and evaluate their understanding and impressions of the film through interviews and surveys. While such an approach would not emulate the exact response of spectators from 2007, it would presumably help with understanding how successfully *The Golden Compass* communicates the story of Pullman's novels, casting light on whether the film ever had the potential for a better reception had it been released under different circumstances.

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