Introduction

It is common practice nowadays for adaptation critics to denounce the lack of meta-theoretical thinking in adaptation studies (see, e.g., Ray 2000:45, Murray 2008a:15, Elliot 2003:6, Albrecht-Crane and Cutchins 2010a:12). Scholars have pleaded for a study of adaptation as adaptation (e.g. Hutcheon 2006:xiv), one that eschews value judgments (Raw 2012:3), goes beyond normative fidelity-based discourse, examines adaptation from an intertextual perspective (e.g. Stam 2000) and abandons the single source model for a multiple source model (e.g. Hutcheon 2006:xiii). This study looks into a research program that does all that and more. Developed in the 1970s by Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury, the polysystem (henceforth PS) theory of translation was introduced into adaptation studies in the early 1990s. Proposals for this approach emerged as a reaction to a number of then common criticisms within the field of (mostly film) adaptation studies. The criticisms still sound familiar today. In response to the lack of meta-theoretical thinking in the discipline, PS served as a conceptual and methodological framework that allowed scholars to study adaptations in a more consistent way. In an effort to eschew value judgments, it aimed at a descriptive-explanatory approach. In an attempt to step beyond the endless accumulation of ad hoc selected case studies, the PS approach called for the development of broader corpus-based research. It also entailed a break with the customary fidelity-based discourse and the single source text model. It suggested looking at adaptations as adaptations, the production and reception of which are determined by multiple conditioners to be found in both source and target contexts. The multi-source text model raised the questions of whether and how one can study adaptational relationships as a more or less specific class that can be distinguished from other types (e.g. intertextual?, intermedial?, intercultural?, ...) of relationships. Adopting a PS approach to the study of adaptations would be to propose a step beyond the Auteurism, i.e. looking for explanations beyond the

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1 See, e.g., Even-Zohar (1978; 1979) and Toury (1980).
level of individual agency (even if contextualized). It suggests investigating conditioners that operate at non-individual levels (expressed in terms of systemic features and norms). This approach has since gone under different names (Hermans 1999:8-9), one of which is the ‘target-oriented approach’. PS adaptation studies are target-oriented for more than one reason. Firstly, they are target-oriented because their initial point of investigation is the adaptation as an end product. Adaptations are seen as (more or less) specific phenomena that display certain features, function in specific ways (e.g. as adaptations or as originals) and occupy certain positions (e.g. more or less innovative or conservative)\(^2\) in their respective historical contexts. The PS approach is also target-oriented because it postulates that the adaptation process is teleological, i.e. that it is determined by both source (con)text and target (con)text conditioners, and that in terms of final decision-making, the latter may be more important than the former. Indeed, a PS approach assumes that at the end of the day, it is the adapter(s) who decide(s) and not the adapted. A third phase in the investigation then looks for systemic coherence between the function and position of sets of adaptations within their initial historical contexts and their respective adaptation processes.

In order to assess the PS research method for adaptation studies, I began an investigation of 604 film noir adaptations in 1985. This resulted in a PhD thesis called *L’adaptation filmique de textes littéraires: Le film noir américain* (Cattrysse 1990). Two years later, a truncated version of that dissertation was published by Peter Lang under the title *Pour une théorie de l’adaptation filmique: Le film noir américain* (Cattrysse 1992b). However, the research project was discontinued in 1991, and only a handful of English language essays were published afterwards, which referred to the French foundational texts. A decade later, a few more attempts were made to test and launch PS adaptation studies. For example, Remael (2000) conducted a PS study of seven British New Wave film adaptations. In this study, among other things, norms were examined with respect to screen- and dialogue writing. Other adaptation scholars have briefly reiterated the main tenets of PS adaptation studies (see, e.g., Aragay 2005:24-25), criticized some of its concepts (see, e.g., Palmer 2004, Venuti 2007), or applied one or two PS tenets to a limited set of adaptations. For example, Dovey (2005:163ff.) studied how African filmmakers, when adapting literature, also take into

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\(^2\) In PS-speak, the word ‘to function’ is redefined as *to be presented and/or perceived as X within a specific space-time context*. A study of the positions adaptations occupy in their host contexts involves yet another set of questions. See below.
consideration ‘pressing political problems of how to represent a colonial past in a postcolonial present’ (Dovey 2005:164). Similarly, Pardo García (2005) examined how the production of *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994) was not only conditioned by a single literary source text, but also by other source-modelling materials such as previous adaptations of *Frankenstein* and contemporary adaptations of other texts. However, it is fair to say that in general, the PS approach as such has not caught on in adaptation studies. The fact that adaptation commentators have generally ignored the approach makes it difficult to assess why PS adaptation studies have not fared so well. The situation is clearer in the parent discipline of translation studies, where the approach has been applied more extensively and translation scholars have more openly and explicitly criticized its features. For example, translation scholar Philippe Codde (2007:91) observes that in both translation and literary studies, the PS approach has had to compete with more recent systemic approaches such as Bourdieu’s *praxeology* and Siegfried Schmidt’s *constructivism*. In 1995, PS pioneer Gideon Toury dropped the name ‘polysystem’ altogether, replacing it with *Descriptive Translation Studies* (henceforth DTS). And yet even within translation studies one cannot say that the PS approach, as such, is dead. DTS scholars who abandon the label continue to use the approach in more than one respect (see, e.g., Rosa 2010). What is more, a growing number of more recent studies have suggested that a PS approach may still be of use to translation studies (see, e.g., Codde 2003, Weissbrod 2004; 2006, Andringa 2006, Sütiste and Torop 2007, Venuti 2007, Chang 2008; 2011, and Yau 2011). Furthermore, a look at certain recent (mostly Anglophone) adaptation studies indicates that even if the PS approach is not directly mentioned, several of its key tenets are now generally accepted in adaptation studies. I mentioned a number of them at the opening of this introduction. Adaptation critics sometimes merely repeat them as isolated slogans. At other times, scholars wittingly or unwittingly apply PS (-related) tenets in their actual research. For example, Jeffers (2006) offers the normative but target-oriented study *Britain Colonized: Hollywood’s Appropriation of British Literature*. Both Strong (2008) and Leitch (2008) adopt a target-oriented perspective and study the adaptation process as teleological: the former when he discusses the relevance of film genre as conditioning the (film) adaptation process; the latter when he considers adaptation as a genre in and of itself. When Raw (2012:6-7) describes some post-1945 Turkish adaptations of popular literary texts (e.g. Sherlock Holmes, Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer), he observes a marked indifference in the adaptations to both fidelity to the source texts and originality within their host context. In these cases, the adapters seemed more concerned with continuing the success of Turkish folk-tales (with an emphasis on action
Descriptive Adaptation Studies

and a focus on the fantastic). Raw’s description reiterates and confirms the existence of adaptational strategies that had been studied more than two decades previously in *film noir* adaptations (see Chapter 11). Similarly, Cherrington (2012), investigating the way Chinese students translate and adapt themselves when studying and living in British university campuses, observed a structural correlation between the degree of challenge in the adaptation process and the distance between the home culture and the British (i.e. target) culture. As disparate as these examples may appear to the reader who is not familiar with the PS approach, it is one of its merits to offer analytical tools that allow researchers to compare and perceive similar or dissimilar adaptational strategies across apparently very different isolated cases. For example, both Raw (2012) and Cherrington (2012) unwittingly comment on adaptational strategies identical to those observed in PS *film noir* adaptation studies from the 1990s; they even match much earlier translational strategies observed in the 1970s by Itamar Even-Zohar regarding the evolution of literary genres (see Chapter 11).

Hence, looking at more than two decades of PS (-related) adaptation studies offers a paradoxical picture. On the one hand, one cannot conclude that the PS approach, as such, has widely been applied in adaptation studies. On the other hand, one cannot conclude that the approach is dead and buried: several PS (-related) concepts are commonly accepted nowadays in adaptation studies, even though now, many younger adaptation students are unaware that a few decades ago, they were part of a research program that set out to study adaptations in a more consistent way. Moreover, although the PS proposals are at least 25 years old (some closer to 100) more recent adaptation critics still occasionally label them ‘new’ and ‘pioneering’ (Leitch 2008:63), or even ‘path-breaking’ (DeBona 2010:1, Murray 2012:3). This suggests at least two things: 1) the 1990s PS proposals were far ahead of their time and 2) they remain valid today. In other words, most of the problems that were raised in adaptation studies in the 1990s (if not before) still await a solution today. This suggests, therefore, that there might be more than one reason to revisit the PS approach and determine to what extent its 1990s formulation is still relevant. The following are five of those reasons:

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3 At least one adaptation scholar admits that ‘much of this latest work, as might be expected of writers on adaptation [his words, not mine], is not wholly new’ (Leitch 2008:63). Leitch here refers to the work of McFarlane, Stam, Cartmell, Whelehan, Naremore and Cardwell.
1. To reiterate a few loose ideas is one thing, but to develop a consistent research method is quite another. Consequently, the fact that adaptation critics have recently repeated certain PS (-related) tenets offers as much an argument for as against a revisiting of the earlier PS approach. As stated above, PS theory was an attempt to develop more consistent meta-theoretical thinking in the discipline. And, as also stated above, adaptation critics still bemoan the lack of meta-theoretical thinking in adaptation studies. However, in this volume I presuppose that to theorize a practice helps the practitioner become conscious of that practice. More concretely, theorizing involves consciously reflecting on epistemic goals and methodological means. It implies developing plans of action that involve specific steps. It should enable researchers to reflect consciously about how to evaluate the efficiency of the research program and its tools. Efficiency is evaluated based on predetermined and achieved (or missed) goals. A consistent research program should allow scholars to draw a map, or several maps, that help tell them whether they are making progress or just reinventing wheels. As suggested above, meta-theoretical reflection aims to stir up discussion. All this is -or should be- common knowledge. However, more often than not, opponents of theory seem to share a rather widespread misconception about the term ‘theory’, arguing that increased awareness kills intuition or creativity. A brief look at any top-level practice, e.g. tennis or music, shows that quite the opposite is true: greater awareness or knowledge exponentially increases intuitive and creative potential. If this is true in other professions, why would it be different in adaptation studies?

2. While some PS concepts have been adopted by more recent adaptation studies, others have been misunderstood or misrepresented. For example, I refer to the confusion between the Saussurean and PS concepts of system and the subsequent unfounded criticism that PS cannot investigate historical change. Misrepresentations such as this warrant correction.

3. If some tenets of PS theory have been adopted in recent adaptation studies, others remain unknown and/or under-investigated. For example, I refer to the oft-repeated mantra of studying ‘adaptation as adaptation’. In order to study adaptation as adaptation, the PS approach involved a so-called ‘functional’ definition of adaptation. This ‘functional’ approach offered both advantages and problems, none of which have been seriously investigated.

4. Furthermore, it should be clear that the world has changed since 1990. As I finish this manuscript, new buzz words are emerging like ‘convergence cul-
ture’ (Jenkins 2003; 2008), which refers to the increased merging of disparate media worlds such as film, books and gaming into globalized multimedia industries, as well as its corollary ‘de-convergence cultures’ (e.g. Jin 2013). How do these changes raise new (or perhaps old?) questions, inter alia, with respect to the concept of ‘adaptation’ as remediation and its correlate ‘original’, the aforementioned target-oriented approach, the classification of types of achieved equivalence, etc. Hence the question: do changed media industries require a reassessment of PS tenets, and if so, which ones? It stands to reason that subsequent research cannot simply repeat what was proposed a quarter of a century ago. The PS approach as it was suggested in the 1990s will have to be studied and amended in light of more recent findings in various neighboring and perhaps more remote but relevant disciplines.

5. And finally, I reiterate a question I raised in 1990: where does a PS or DTS or ‘descriptive adaptation studies’ (henceforth DAS) approach position itself in the larger epistemological debate (e.g. in the constructivist4 or realist epistemological families)? PS was originally presumed to be a realist approach. However, PS and subsequent DTS scholars have been slow to incorporate epistemological reflection into their research.5 For example, the question whether ‘realist’ meant ‘positivist’, ‘critical realist’, ‘situational realist’ or something else6, has scarcely interested translation or adaptation scholars. This may explain why criticism of positivist theories in the human sciences has often been directed against the PS/DTS approach. In the meantime, it should be pointed out that DTS scholars have done some catching up by paying more attention to epistemological issues. By contrast, this wider epistemological debate remains under-investigated in adaptation studies. Hence, in this study I will pay more attention to specific epistemological considerations than has been done in previous presentations of the PS approach. These considerations are based on notions taken from the philosophy of science, the psychology of perception and cognitive studies. Consequently, the

4 Epistemological literature uses both the terms ‘constructivist’ and ‘constructionist’. I hereafter use the former. Others still use the term ‘epistemic’ instead of constructivist. See, e.g., Mayes (2005).
5 See, e.g., translation scholar Chesterman (2009a:5), who regrets not having known more about the philosophy of science sooner in his career. It should be noted, however, that he had developed thorough epistemological reflection about translation studies at least a decade prior to this.
6 About the terminological complexity, see, e.g., Hibberd (2010).
epistemological reflections that follow are not new to scholars in these disciplines, although they do appear to be new to most students of adaptation studies. Be that as it may, it is not implied that this monograph represents some final blueprint for studying adaptation – far from it. The reader should know that at the end many questions are left unanswered. Establishing a theory of adaptation or a coherent research program for it is not the task of a single scholar. Hence, with respect to the development of a research method, one should not confuse ‘coherent’ with ‘complete’. As with any other research program, the PS or DAS approach aims its searchlight at one set of questions while turning a blind eye to others. The criticisms that emerge from such limitations should not lead to abandoning the approach as a whole but rather to complementary efforts that improve it. One could consider such a project as an open source program where everyone who is likeminded, able and willing may contribute and work toward the further development of the approach.

In conclusion, may I repeat that this is a study on the study of adaptations, not a study of adaptations. Lessons have been taken mostly from PS and DTS, the philosophy of science, the psychology of perception and cognitive studies, just to name a few. In the volume that follows, I try to discover to what extent know-how borrowed from these and other disciplines could be used to update the original PS approach as presented in the 1990s. To support these arguments, examples will be taken from my own research and from more recent work in adaptation studies. It is for practical reasons that these examples deal with film adaptations only. This restriction implies in no way that a PS approach could not be applied to other types of adaptations. As a matter of fact, Even-Zohar developed the original PS approach as a research program to deal with cultural phenomena in general. From this it also follows that the reader should not expect methodical in-depth analyses of large groups of adaptations. The focus will be on conceptual tools that serve the descriptive study of adaptations. I must leave actual application of the method to the talented researchers who come after me.

The first part of this study outlines the wider background of adaptation studies and sketches some obstacles to the development of a consistent research program. It also explains, again, why and how the idea arose to study adaptations using a research method that was designed for the study of translations. This first part concludes with a short description of the PS approach as it was presented in the early 1990s. It serves as an introduction to the reader who is not familiar with the basics of the approach. Subsequently, parts II and III take a closer and more critical look at traditional PS concepts in the light of more recent findings in the above-mentioned fields of philosophy of science, psychology of
perception, cognitive studies, comparative studies, etc. Time and again, the main question will be to what extent, if any, an updated PS approach is still possible.

Part II tackles the ‘descriptive’ part of the approach: What does it mean to elaborate a descriptive approach, and is it altogether possible to maintain a stance that is strictly descriptive? A closer look at the ‘description’ label reveals that it represents a ‘package deal’, which includes and excludes at once a number of features. For example, a descriptive approach aims to distinguish description from prescription. Descriptive is not understood to mean ‘objective’ or observer-independent. On the contrary, ‘descriptive’ means ‘empirical’ and depends, therefore, on corpus-based research. However, in order to compile a set of occurrences, one needs to define first what one is going to study. This raises the question whether and how one can define the object of study in a descriptive way. The fact that description involves both synchrony and diachrony concerns a common misunderstanding about the PS approach that has already been mentioned. Part II concludes with some reflections on description and explanation, and the controversial claim that, according to some PS and DTS scholars, description should allow for prediction.

As explained above, PS adaptation study was a reaction to a normative, fidelity-based, source (con)text-oriented approach. As such, it was positioned as target (con)text oriented. Part III deals with some implications of this standpoint. PS adaptation study begins with the investigation of a set of adaptations as end products. It considers adaptations as more or less specific phenomena and examines the functioning and position(s) of adaptations in their target context(s). A second set of questions relates to the adaptation process, which is assumed to be target oriented, i.e. conditioned by target (con)text requirements. A third segment examines the existence of systemic relations between the adaptation process and the function(s) and position(s) of its end result in its initial host context(s).

The findings gathered in these three parts lead to some conclusions, which are outlined in part IV. They consist of the approach’s positive points as well as suggestions for further research.