

In defence of infidelity: reciprocal enlightenment between literature and film

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A literatura através do cinema: Realismo, magia e a arte da interpretaçãoⁱ

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Abstract

The present review considers the principles of film adaptation of Western literature classics, according to Robert Stam's proposal in *Literature through film: Realism, magic and the art of adaptation*. Beyond the pattern of "fidelity to the Canon", here we underscore the polyphonic structure of the text, its genre and media hybridism and its reference to political and social contexts that make both literature and cinema expressions of a more complex universe: contemporary culture.

Keywords: literature – cinema – adaptation – polyphony – hybridism

Resumo

Esta resenha aborda os princípios da adaptação cinematográfica de obras consagradas da literatura ocidental, conforme a proposta de Robert Stam em *A literatura através do cinema: Realismo, magia e a arte da adaptação*. Para além do parâmetro de "fidelidade aos textos canônicos", sublinham-se aqui a composição polifônica, a hibridização de gêneros e mídias e a remetência a contextos políticos e sociais que tornam a literatura e o cinema expressões de um universo mais complexo: a cultura contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: literatura – cinema – adaptação – polifonia – hibridismo

The pattern of fidelity to an original work which, implicitly or explicitly, is present in the discussions about film adaptations of literary texts always indicates certain level of submission to the Canons. As if such adaptations were mere transpositions of romances to the big screen, they are otherwise caught in more complex fabrics, echoing the flavors of the moment of enunciation, also the points of view of each producer and the technological and narrational inherent cinematic possibilities. Besides that, if we take Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theory as reference we will end up finding the evidence that there are no pure original texts, not so ever copies perfectly assembled according to a previously set model.

On the trace of multiplicity and hybridization of genres, repertoires and points of view, Robert Stam reviews the statute of film adaptation in *A literatura através do cinema: Realismo, magia e a arte da adaptação*. A closer look at the title suggests by itself the

justness of the adverb “through”: it is related to a point of view according to which texts actually intersect one another, enlighten one another. In the author’s own words, the book is a work of *deprovincializing* the approaches to cinema and literature, since both are aligned with a transtextual line of thinking that makes purisms impossible. Literature itself, in its most valued form of expression, the romance, departs from a core where we may find oral tradition, the “cancioneiros”ⁱⁱⁱ, dramatic performances, travel chronicles, the novels of chivalry. As expression of bourgeois ascension, the romance genre is polyphonic by essence, sewing together heterogenic material coming from popular tradition and conferring legitimacy to previously undertaken genres.

The impossibility (or even the ineptness) of a plain fidelity to the original work, thus shows up as one of the forces of literary adaptation to the movies. Instead of a philological archaeology that seeks to establish the source text, discourses particular shifts are more appealing – along with what do they tell us about cultural boundaries, power modulations, predominant ideologies in each historical moment. The narrative-discursive organization of the world, in the arts, bounces between the tendency to verism (in case which the narrative plots seem to be structured by themselves, as if the narrator “had both hands backwards”) and the anti-ilusionism (in case which the art statute is always at stake). In the present work, the self-conscious disposition indicates still a shift of interest: from the immanent meaning of the work to the possibilities of interaction between the text and the reader (the basis for the self-conscious romance). As a programmatic project, the veristic tradition in literature has been systematized after the second half of the nineteenth century, in the form of a reaction to the romantic *pathos*. The so called realistic movement, notwithstanding the spread of rationalism and the documental observation of reality, did not suppress the creation of plots based on the fantastic, the interplay of different points of view and the presence of unreliable narrators. If, in literary terms, the realist-fantast dichotomy is thus found to be unbearable, in the movies it touches the impossible. In regard of its nature, such mean of communication associates realistic potential (for it broadens an effect of objectivity and of immediate caption of the world) and fantastic alternatives (for the use of effects to shorten or expand time and space, merge meanings, rearrange the bound between material reality and dreamlike elements). Even if the genesis of cinema historically concurs with the realistic project in literature, this two universes’ mutual references make possible a constant review of romance tradition through film’s perspective. It is from such crossing of references that new texts flourish, updating in the arts the social establishment and wishes of each time.

It is so that the opening chapter of the book is dedicated to Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quijote, a romance which at the same time that dialogues with tradition (since it is structured according to a parodic movement), serves as model for future reinterpretations of it even in terms of determining an ethos socially recognized by the worshipping of an heroic existence as much as it is utopian, as in Antônio Gedeão’s verses: “Inútil seguir vizinhos / querer ser depois ou ser antes. / Cada um é seus caminhos! / Onde Sancho vê moinhos, / Dom Quixote vê gigantes!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Being a modern romance (dated from the beginning of the seventeenth century), the work of Cervantes shows us a destabilized world, in which chivalry tradition is made anachronic. The imaginary of the walking knight attaches itself to the main comic character, decrepit and idealist – the counterpart of whom, under the sign of market pragmatism, is his faithful esquire Sancho. Again, at this point, dichotomies are not in stake. The Quijote-Sancho couple rises in oxymoron terms: the characters are independent, as much as the sublime and the grotesque or realism and magic can be.

Founded on self-reflexivity, Cervantes' *Quijote* introduces artistic mediation into the scene and refuses the transparency effect. Some adaptations of the romance to the movies share the same perspective, such as the never marketed version made by Orson Welles in the fifties. Much in Cervantes' way, which was not to deny the reader taking pleasure from what he himself ridicularized (the chivalry novel). Welles dialogs with hollywoodian productions, filming, nevertheless, in the opposite direction of such tradition. In the same way the romance was born under a relative unpretentiousness (it was suppose to be a short story), Welles' movie in the beggining would be a tv attraction for CBS, but became a huge project to the point that the director went on nurturing it even after the refusal by one of the television network executives. So the movie is close to a chivalry adventure, in regard of its production adversities and its refusal of the hegemonic order – and such inversion is present in the making of plot. According to Stam, Welles was one of the few film makers to capture the founding modernity of the book, shown through stylistic resources that restitute to fiction the role of conceiving its own true. In contrast to a self-conscious narrative line of work, the second chapter presents as work-source Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719. The romance is under the influence of a veristic and planning initiative, shadowing the possibility for multiple points of view and conferring legitimacy to the British colonial empire. Crusoe embodies the protestant ethic by worshiping work as the ascending path to economic success (the undefiable destiny of those "elected"), but also a defense of individualism. This perspective is present in the romance in a twofold manner: If in the plot the main character denies the interdependence (his view of alterity alternates between defensive and predatory), in the work structuring Defoe refuses literary intertextuality as well.

That is how many of *Crusoe*'s adaptations are pregnant with a sort of moral commitment: a rescue of the work in face of its own purisms. The polyphonic intention, absent to the romance, otherwise structures the movies *Las aventuras de Robinson Crusoe* (1954), directed by Luís Buñuel, and *Man Friday* (1975), by Jack Gold. In the first case, the colonial impulses are weakened in the character's composition, who becomes more gregarious – even with some loosening of the relationship master-slave, shown in the daily life with Friday. Anyway, Buñuel's adaptation does not avoid following in the steps of certain structuring stereotypes present in Defoe's work, such as the barbarian aspect of the natives. In *Man Friday* - whose echoes resound more directly the theatre play written by Adrian Mitchell than the source-romance -, there is an intent to give colonialism a response: Friday's point of view is privileged to the point that he

shapes, in humanistic terms, the very character of Crusoé. In this case, it is hard not to think that there is an inversion of perspective: salvationism upside down flattening social relationships.

Back to the series of self-conscious narratives, the third chapter of the book is dedicated to the adaptation of romances related to the *menipéia* tradition, characteristic of the narratives filled with generic hybridism, references pointing out to both erudition and comicity, drifting moments of digression. At this point of the analysis the author observes romances aligned with *Don Quijote*, privileging *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and his Friend, Mr. Abraham Abrams* (1742) and *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), both by Henry Fielding, whose film adaptations were carried out by Tony Richardson. In terms of the romances as much as in the movies, some specificities in the setting of the narrator appear, widely intervening, since the focus of self-reflexive art is shifted so to enlighten the artificiality (in the construct sense) of the process. This sort of narrative focus presupposes the active presence of the reader/spectator and making original the tensions emerging from this connection.

To the Brazilian audience, nevertheless, the best passage of the chapter regards an approach to Machado de Assis' *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, the work that opens our realist tradition in literature, in 1881. Profoundly connected to Brazil, in both personal and intellectual ways, Stam points out the *menipéia* tradition in the romance, as well as a sort of foretaste of fantastic realism, which is materialized, from the start, by the presence of a dead narrator, who, "from the other side of the mystery", finds himself free to bring out with sophistication his typical cynicism. The adaptation for *Memórias póstumas* (2001), by André Klotzel, emphasizes the self-reflexivity present in Machado, as well as the ironic overall composition, indicating ambiguities and disruptions in the source-narrative. In the movie, there is a gap between Brás Cubas, the narrator (dead), and Brás Cubas, the character (the one who, so certain of being predestined to glory, led a blank existence, cynically well adjusted to his own mistake), in such way that they can see each other through one another.

Opening the fourth chapter, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) focuses on the literary theme as a narrative pattern. Emma, the main character, echoes the quijotean *ethos* taking a path of disappointment: the perception that there is a radical inadequacy between life and literature. Forging a "being in the world" based on the romantic female heroes model, the main character's descending path (infidelity, debts, abandonment, suicide) does not allow us to easily interpret the romance, which is emblematic of the occidental genesis of Realism, as being a demolishing critique of Romanticism. In Flaubert's work, the goal of the romance is the opposition – and the interdependence – between the two stylistic patterns, such is his known quotation on literature: "Write well about mediocrity". The paradoxical dimension, that merges together a cold and passionless voice to one studiously ambiguous (a voice that is literal regarding the romantic canons to the same extent it diminishes them through irony), is otherwise undertaken in filmic adaptations. In Flaubert's work, the prevalence of the style transforms *Bovary* in what Stam calls a "protocinematographic romance", taking in

consideration its screenplay aspects, that seem to indicate camera movements, voice modulations, sound stratifications.

Flaubert's adaptation by Vincent Minelli, *Madame Bovary* (1949) states clearly the producer's association to the mainstream cinema, mainly by the setting of the narrator. If in the work-source it is a restrained entity, giving voice to different characters (in the multiplicity of points of view, everyone of them has legitimate motivations to their actions), the movie presents a moralistic content. Merging the narrator to who would be the empirical author, Minelli's Flaubert is taken by an indisputable authority – which is, however, foreign to the romance. The work of Claude Chabrol in *Madame Bovary* (1991) is guided by a conscious strictness with regard to the work-source, which, in the transposition to cinematographic language reviews the potential screenplay present in the original *Bovary*. As much as Flaubert, Chabrol sets the “agency narrator”, who recognizes the legitimacy of the many perspectives and at the same time does not privilege any of them. The approach given to time is equally expressive: the filming technique, as in the romance, structures a syntagm in which coexist a gnomic time division, typical of unchangeable truths (the Romantic immemorial time) and the dragged, fluid time of daily minor events (the Realistic functional time).

The unreliable narrator, self-determined by his own neurosis, is the topic of the fifth chapter. As an expression of the self-reflexivity typical of modern romance, such argument indicates that the narrative has become hopelessly partial: the narrator responds in advance to “another”, assuming, in literary tradition, different shapes: Dostoevsky's underground man, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, Lispector's Rodrigo S.M.

The hyperbolic sense of self, the profound vanity and the latent aggressiveness shake the pact between the narrator and the reader/spectator, since they go with the flow of the narrator's instabilities. Among detailed works of analysis about adaptations, two versions of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) stand out: one by Stanley Kubrick (1962), another by Adrian Lyne (1997).

The confessional mode assumed by a highly doubtful narrator is associated in the romance to the context of mass communication: if Flaubert's Emma Bovary was immerse in romantic literature imaginary, Nabokov's Dolores Hazel – on Humbert perspective – is related to typically hollywoodian images (it is not a surprise, then, that *Lolita*'s after-text even includes movies like *American Beauty* [1999], by Sam Mendes). Produced in Kubric's realistic period (which precedes the emblematic *A Clockwork Orange* and *Dr. Strangelove*), *Lolita*'s adaptation dares little in aesthetic terms. The instrumental perspective present in it weakens the romance self-reflexive style composition. Moreover, the identification between the spectator gaze and Humbert's point of view is many times compromised, as he, due to plans distribution, was being watched (subject to reaction of the spectator). Kubrick's point of view seems to indicate still the domestication of tabu, specially if we observe that the prevalence of political correctness had not yet the patrol aspect in the 60's. Lyne, otherwise, favors

the identification of the audience with the character-narrator (the movie has expressive plans related to points of view), but offers Humbert's humanization, he that emerges, played by Jeremy Irons, as a victim of circumstances, of his own desire – something quite diverse from the treatment to incest in the romance.

Being the movement in the cinema that joined formal innovation and sensory pleasure, the French nouvelle vague is thematized in the sixtieth chapter, presenting a much clever change of directions: begin with the movies and then to go back to literature. That is justified because the nouvelle vague, - structured not only as an aesthetic school, but also as a ruling strategy to film manufacturing - , presupposes literary adaptation (some texts were already born to be converted in screenplays), privileging less known authors. So, since the romance was “written to the big screen”, to discuss about adaptation is made inadequate if we want to be strict. From such truly collaborative enterprise, emerges *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), by Robbe-Grillet and Alain Resnais, a work able to discourage any initiative towards transparency or the creation of realistic illusion and doing so challenging film continuity radically. Playing with the spectator, the narrative frustrates cause-effect relationships – in fact, “making sense” is something out of perspective in this case – offering a flow that is at the same time playful and aggressive: a movie to be absorbed – not understood, in terms of intelligibility. Another Resnais' work (this time in association with Marguerite Duras), *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), there are echoes of baroque aesthetics coming from the juxtaposition of contraries, generating a unity that is tense, changing and contradictory, not only for blending issues like sexuality and death (aestheticized in a way that is unthinkable to mainstream cinema productions), but still in relation to the different layers of the filmic text (image, voice, live sonorization, music). Over the referentialization of pleasure and pain, Resnais tries to retrace memory meanders thus approaching film editing to the unspeakable of mental processes. At last, *The Contempt* (1963), by Jean-Luc Godard, based on Alberto Moravia's homonymous romance from 1945, emerges as a metatextual work for it dialogues with the genre of tragedy, wrapping it in some comic trivialization. The narrative externalizes the destruction of a couple while the movie is being built. Maybe the most expressive result of Godard's typical causticity is the destruction of the Greek Canon as being the occidental birthplace, *locus* of an ancestral fullness spread by the epic poems: heroic acts decline in face of middle class minor dramas.

The final chapter of *Literature through cinema*, dedicated to magical realism, is specially enjoyable because it makes clear the connections of such aesthetics to the Latin-American context, which is under the impact of what the author called a trilateral multi-perspectivism (the impact of colonization in a sense that is simultaneously European, African and Amerindian). Pregnant with a magic element which is not parted from everyday radicalness, native spirituality and popular rites are understood, in Stam's work, under the perspective of incorporation and of multicultural synthesis – but not understood, of course, under an obscurantist perspective which has many times determined Eurocentric approaches.

That is how *Macunaíma* (1928), Mario de Andrade's romance-rhapsody, presents a "hero with no character", meaning that he is deprived of a univocal ethnic-moral vector. He is the kind who has no kind, synthesis of a Brazility that transcends stereotypes, undoubtedly mestiça (mixed). It is interesting to notice how the Cinema Novo (New Cinema) is aligned with such allegoric tradition, sustaining a politic-aesthetic criticism project and the process of rediscovering an everchanging Brazil. Macunaíma's adaptation by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, in 1968, echoes the restrictions of the military regime, emphasizes the crudity of social Darwinism and the leftovers of a ephemeral effervescence in a dependent economy. The romance – that otherwise was born as screenplay - *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and her Heartless Grandmother* (*La increíble y triste historia de la cándida Eréndira y de su abuela desalmada*) (1972), written by the colombian author Gabriel García-Márquez is also reviewed when in face of Eréndira's adaptation (1983), by Ruy Guerra. The work-source, with its long and comic title, makes us remind of picaresque narratives of the seventieth century, but shows a profound sense of currentness as it reorganizes, in a fantastic way, cultural statutes recognizable in latin-american context: interpersonal relationship marked by physical and symbolic violences, compulsory prostitution, political caudilhismo (thoritarianism), predatory effects of peripheral capitalism. Stam's book, in that matter, disturbs the analytical tradition aligned in defence of the canons, at the same time it arguments why the limits of an artistic expression can only be understood under the light of another artistic expression: impregnating one another, both cinema and literature keep their roots in the everchanging universe of human creation.

ⁱ Original English Title: *Literature Through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005.

ⁱⁱ Literally, songbooks

ⁱⁱⁱ "Useless to follow neighbours/ want to be after or before/ Each one is his own paths!/ Where Sancho sees mills,/ Don Quijote sees giants!"