LITERATURE AND THE REALM OF FILM ADAPTATION

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RESUMO: Este artigo resultou, com algumas alterações, de parte da um dos capítulos da Dissertação de Mestrado do autor, intitulado "Film and Television Adaptation: A Comparitive Analysis of A Streetcar Named Desire Adaptations for Cinema and Television", apresentada à UFSC em fevereiro de 2004. O objetivo do mesmo é discutir os principais postulados teóricos concernentes aos estudos em adaptação cinematográfica de textos literários, surgidos a partir da década de 1950. A discussão centra-se, principalmente, nos aspectos que envolvem o processo de adaptação cinematográfica, em especial, no processo de adaptação de romance e texto dramático para o cinema, através da análise de diferentes categorias de adaptação cinematográfica proposta por teóricos como Bluestone (1957), Wagner (1975), MacFarlane (1996) e Stam (2000).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura e Cinema, Adaptação Cinematográfica

ABSTRACT: This article is part of one the chapters of a Master Dissertation entitled "Film and Television Adaptation: An analysis of A Streetcar Named Desire Adaptations for Cinema and Television", submitted to Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina – UFSC. It aims at discussing the major theoretical findings regarding film adaptation of literary texts sprang in this field from 1950s onwards. The discussion focuses mainly on the features that film adaptation encompasses; especially the relationship between novels, drama and films through the analysis of different categories of film adaptation proposed by scholars such as Bluestone (1957), Wagner (1975), MacFarlne (1996) and Stam (2000).

KEY WORDS: Literature and Cinema, Film Adaptation

Since the beginning of film production, in the late nineteenth century, a considerable number of literary texts such as novels, plays, and short-stories, has been adapted into films. According to Brian McFarlane, "the idea of using the novel—that already established repository of narrative fiction—for source material got underway, and the process has continued more or less unabated for ninety years" (MCFARLANE, 1996: 27). It is not surprising that, when compared with the approximately five hundred-year history of printing-press culture, the hundred-year history of film seems remarkably brief. However, despite the relative novelty of its technology, the process of development and maturity of cinema has occurred in a short time span that quickly elevated it to a privileged position as one of the central conveyors of narrative in contemporary society.

The relationship between literature and film is not as simple as it may first appear, and it has been the subject matter of important discussions in film and literature studies. In order to understand an adapted film, then, it is also necessary to understand the way literary expression in particular has informed, extended, shaped, and limited the way films are made. Likewise, twentieth-century literature reveals the prominent influence of filmic narrative on its structures, styles, themes, and philosophical concerns.

Such relationship is so intrinsic that film adaptation as a phenomenon began as soon as cinema started to establish itself as a new narrative entertainment. As Andrew affirms, "the making of a film out of a previous written text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself" (ANDREW, 2000: 29). Nevertheless, due to the complexity and variety of literature and film, several film scholars have devoted time to elaborate theoretical discussions on the nature of the relationship between literature and film by defining their boundaries and their specificities. Thus, by having specified the features belonging to literature and film, the relationship between both mediums can be understood from a more thorough perspective.

ADAPTATION AND LITERARY GENRES: NOVELS

One of the first successful studies attempting to scrutinize the relations between written words and visual images was yielded by George Bluestone in his book *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (1957). Bluestone's study is mainly concerned with defining the boundaries as well as the distinctiveness of each medium. In the chapter entitled "Limits of the Novel and Limits of the Film", for instance, he theorizes on the forces that shape the cinematic adaptation from a novel. He asserts that "regardless of the fact that film and literature appear to share so much in common, as they both are narrative modes, significant shifts are necessary in the process of adaptation" (BLEUSTONE, 1957: 11). In that sense, by discussing the nature of each medium, Bluestone argues that the divergence between the two mediums can be effectively identified, and,

thus, a theory on the features that encompass the process of adaptation from novel to film can be developed.

Therefore, in order to elaborate his exploration more systematically, Bluestone organizes his discussion under five sections contrasting the main distinctions between the mediums of literature and film. Firstly, he argues that, whereas the novel is predominantly a linguistic medium, films have images as a main feature. Secondly, novels are consumed by a small, literary audience, whilst film can count on a large mass audience. Thirdly, the process of a novel's production is a result of one single individual, a writer, whereas the production of films is a much more complex process, for it involves a large group of people working cooperatively under industrial conditions in different aspects of the same product. The fourth distinction Bluestone formulates accounts for the relative freedom from censorship a writer may have, whereas film production is constrained by the self-imposed Production Code. Bluestone's last distinction between novel and film concerns the conceptual and discursive form that constitutes the novel, in contrast with the perceptual and representational form of the film.

Moreover, Bluestone deepens his exploration of the relationship between novel and film by differentiating the concept of "mental image" from the notion of "visual image". According to the author, the way viewers construct a story through their physical sight when watching a film is different from the way images are created in their minds as part of their imagination when reading a literary narrative. Thus, each medium forces a different mode of perception, and inevitably requires different skills to *read* them. The assertion that we process and connect to these different mediums in different ways effectively illustrates Bluestone's main claim, that images provoke different associations compared to words. Likewise, in his exploration of "The Trope in Language", it is the words of Robert Burns that best convey this disparity. In Bluestone's discussion of Burns' poem "my love's like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June" (BLUESTONE, 1957: 21), he evokes numerous associations with the image in a sensory and metaphoric way.

Dossiê: Linguagem, Literatura e Cinema

The study of how narrative operates in novels and films is also discussed by Brian MacFarlane in his book *Novels To Films: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (1996). MacFarlane draws from Barthes' studies on the essence of narrative functions in order to establish relations between both mediums in the process of adaptation. However, McFarlane's main concern is to establish distinctions between what can be transferred in the process of adaptation and what cannot. First of all, he points out a difference between *transference* and *adaptation: transference*, he argues, is a relatively easy process by which elements from a novel can be taken and placed within a film; *adaptation*, on the other hand, is a more complicated process by which those elements of a novel that cannot be transferred must be somehow worked out into the film text.

MacFarlane's study of the function of narrative in the adaptation process of novels to film draws especially from Barthes' distinctions of two main groups of narrative functions: distributional and integrational. Firstly, as distributional functions, Barthes defines "functions proper" that operate horizontally in the text. Namely, they are associated with what we conventionally call story and operate in a linear way throughout the text. They have to do with operations, or, in other words, with the *functionality of doing*. Secondly, the integrational functions, which Barthes also calls *indices*, operate vertically within the text and are associated with what we commonly call discourse. It is through the integrational functions, then, that authors convey, for instance, psychological information on characters, data on identity, notations of atmosphere, representations of place, etc. These are functions of *being*, as opposed to those of *doing*. Finally, in line with Bluestone's study, MacFarlane asserts that, whereas novels draw entirely on a verbal sign system, films draw variously and sometimes simultaneously on visual, aural, and verbal signifiers. Consequently, whereas verbal signs operate on a conceptual level, cinematic signs are distinguished for being perceptual. Thus, he concludes that, due to this differentiation, in the process of adaptation only the narrative-plot can be transferred, and not enunciation.

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Besides the formal aspects regarding the distinctions between novels and films such as the transferability of the narrative, as concluded by MacFarlane, critics such as Dudley Andrew prefer to focus attention on how the meaning of a literary text is caught and transformed within the film's text. He points out that the studies on the relationship between literature and film have "much more in common with the theory of interpretation, for, in a strong sense, adaptation is the appropriation of a meaning from a prior text" (ANDREW, 2000: 29). Andrew relates the act of adapting a film from a novel to an act of personal interpretation, which may differ from reader to reader. Thus, any given film adaptation may reflect and reproduce the filmmaker's particular reading of the source text, and, consequently, every adaptation may favor certain aesthetic possibilities and foreclose others, which may eventually match the viewers' reading of the same text. Independently of the deep structure of the narrative, what really matters in this approach is how particularities of a text will be adapted into a film. However, Andrew concludes that the fact that the appropriation of meaning rarely occurs may account for the reason why films based on novels are frequently criticized for failing to accurately adapt literary texts.

From this brief overview of the main points that constitute the scope of the studies on the relationship between novels and films, we can conclude that, setting the boundaries to clarify their similarities and differences must be the first concern of any study aiming to analyze films based on novels.

ADAPTATION AND LITERARY GENRES: DRAMA

The relationship between literature and film does not only take place in the realm of the novel, but also in the realm of drama. The range of instances varies from large budget and word-by-word text film productions such as *Hamlet* by Kenneth Branagh (1996) to the humble and loose *Uncle Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994), loosely adapted by Louis Malle from Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* to film adaptation of David Mamet's play *Oleanna* (1994). Thus, akin to the film adaptation studies,

which investigate the nature of the specific elements that constitute novels and films as distinct mediums, the elements of a play text also yield fruitful ground for broadening the discussion on the field of film adaptation.

An essential element in establishing the connections between drama and film is to accept that drama also encompasses the realm of literature and, therefore, is not only a representational, but also a fictional art. As Robert Scholes (1978) explains in his chapter "The Elements of Drama", although most plays are written to be performed, the art of drama has been producing numerous *closet dramas*, that is, plays that are only written to be read rather than acted out, as Pablo Picasso's *Desire Caught by the Tail* (773-4). Additionally, for many readers, the experience of drama is generally limited to plays in print form instead of in performance. Indeed, plays that were initially meant for stage, film or television performances are extensively read either for pleasure or for academic purposes. Tennessee Williams' plays, for instance, as many other plays by dramatists such as Chekhov, Ibsen, Wilde, Shaw, O'Neill, Beckett and Albee, among others, have become compulsory part of any academic syllabus devoted to understanding the art of drama more thoroughly. Scholes points out that the reason why all these plays have been approached as a text-to-be-read accounts for the fact that, above all, they are all "a form of literature—and art made out of words—and should be understood in relation not only to the theatre, but also to other literary forms: short-story, poem, and essay" (SCHOLES, 1978: 779).

Despite sharing similarities with other literary forms in aspects of narration, plot, characters, as well as the construction of time and space, the basic unity of the dramatic mode also encompasses a certain number of elements that, in their essence, constitute its singularity. Based on the Aristotelian elements of drama both Scholes and Esslin, for instance, highlight the specificities of the drama elements such as action, exposition, character, and dialog. Esslin (1995) points out that most critics agree that the action of drama

consists of eight parts: exposition, problem, point of attack, foreshadowing, complications, crises, climax, and denouement. In Esslin's definitions, he argues that exposition establishes time and place, characters and their relationships, and the prevailing status quo or equilibrium. The problem, for instance, is the event that disrupts the status quo, or shakes the equilibrium and triggers the plot in motion. It usually consists of something simple in most kinds of plots such as in *Streetcar*, when Blanche tells her sister Stella that she has lost Belle Reve and has nowhere else to go.

Due to the fact that drama texts are structured in a dialog format, one can easily be misled to believe that plot in drama is much simpler to be understood than in a novel. Scholes highlights that plot is an extremely complicated element in the dramatic mode, and in order to identify it one has to distinguish it from the scenario. He posits:

> We can understand this distinction if we realize that in a plot all events are necessarily arranged *chronologically*, whereas in a scenario events are arranged *dramatically*—that is, in an order that will create the greatest impact on the audience. (SCHOLES, 1978: 797)

Thus, the understanding of the plot in a play requires an identification of all the events that occur within the plot and the chronological order in which they take place. This identification can be achieved by a thorough and close examination of the scenario focusing on scenario details and their implications to plot development. Once setting details and the sequence of events have been established, one can examine how the plot is presented by the scenario. Scholes' attention on the distinction and relation between plot and setting for the study of drama is very significant in understanding film adaptations based on plays.

By observing these elements that constitute drama, there seems to be no disagreement on the possibilities of approaching it as a text to be read in the same way a novel or a poem are read. Likewise, due to its representational potentiality, the relationship between drama and the mediums of cinema and television has grown so strong that there is little question

concerning the fact that the basic unity of dramatic mode can be adapted to the visual mediums almost effortlessly if compared to a novel adaptation. As Esslin argues, though plays can suitably be adapted to films, they are not modified in "the essence of their mode of expression" (ESSLIN, 1996: 77). Conversely, in the same way that twentieth-century fiction reveals its influence on film, the visual mediums have also been constantly influencing the literary mode. Esslin provides several instances of plays like *A Little Night Music*, which was made out of the scenarios from a Bergman's film, or Pinter's television play *The Lover*, which was later adapted to the stage.

The dramatic mode may thus be highly regarded due to its propensity for being easily adapted into the visual mediums of film and television. However, the recognition of the aesthetic and technical potentialities of drama and film may facilitate a comprehension of the changes that frequently occur when a play is adapted from one medium to another. Thus, with regard to the plot of a play, for instance, film devices like montage and editing can provide the director with limitless possibilities of structuring the play's sequence of action. Esslin points out that the construction of settings can gain a considerable degree of realism through the photographic devices film and television mediums have to offer. The exploration of film devices and techniques can create a thoroughly new view of a dramatic text, as the director can set the camera to roam freely through the setting, showing the action from different perspectives.

The use of other film techniques such as long-shots and close-ups, or cutting from one location to another, also allows the viewer to feel movement, something which is very particular to film discourse. In addition to that, the characters' lines may gain totally different nuances when the actors' faces are shown in close-ups or highlighted by the film's lighting, photography, and soundtrack. In that sense, the adaptation of a play text is as complex a process as a film adaptation of a novel, for it also requires a skillful and accurate orchestration of different film devices and techniques applied to a text which is already constituted by its own distinct features.

Equally noteworthy, the issue of textual temporality appears as another aspect that generally operates and influences the process of adapting a dramatic text to the film medium. Namely, film adaptation of classic plays usually poses the dilemma whether the director should respect the historical time period and language of the source text or update it. In this sense, recent film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have shown a variety of updates regarding time and space. In Baz Luhrmann's version of *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), despite its entire reliance on the source text, the film takes place at the present time on Verona beach (US); in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), the action also takes place in present-time New York. These two films are instances of how contemporary films have been creatively approaching elements such as time and space when adapting plays to visual mediums even though, at the same time, these films still draw entirely from the source play text.

Conversely, the advent of cinema and later of television seems to have exerted considerable influence on the aesthetics and techniques of the dramatic mode so that, in some cases, the differences between these two mediums are entirely blurred. Esslin explains that the influence visual mediums had on contemporary drama accounts for the fact that dramatists like Brecht, Beckett, Pinter, and Williams wrote stage plays and radio plays, as well as television and film scripts (83).

ADAPTATION CATEGORIES AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Due to the variety of forms in which a literary text can be adapted into film medium, researchers in the field of film studies have proposed some strategies aiming at more sustained and systematized forms of approaching film adaptation. Wagner (1975), for instance, proposes three possible categories, which can be used both by the filmmaker and the critic who intend to assess film adaptations: *transposition*, *commentary*, and *analogy*. Firstly, as *transposition*, he categorizes those adapted films in which a literary piece is transported directly onto the screen with a minimum of apparent interference, as in Mike Nichols' *Who's*

Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966), a film adaptation of Edward Albee's homonymous play. Secondly, *commentary* is the category in which a source text is taken and either deliberately or even unconsciously modified to the extent that the film focuses more on the aspects that the filmmaker decided to favor to the detriment of other aspects. In other words, it has to do with the intentions on the part of the filmmaker. Franco Zeffirelli's version of *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) appears as an interesting instance of a film adaptation, which shows overtly those aspects of the play the director wished to emphasize. Finally, a*nalogy,* Wagner's last category, accounts for all film adaptations that take a literary work as a merely starting point for the creation of another work of art totally independent from its originary source. Azerêdo (2001) in her study of irony in Jane Austen's recent film adaptations exemplifies *Clueless* (1995) as an instance of *analogy* (175).

Broadening Wagner's propositions, Andrew engenders more fluid categories for approaching film adaptations, such as *borrowing, intersection*, and *transforming sources*. According to Andrew (2000), *borrowing* basically consists of a type of film adaptation in which the structure, or the idea of a previous text, is taken and used by the filmmaker. He also regards it as a broad and airy mode of adaptation, for the borrowing may vary in several degrees. For example, in some films only the title of the source text is used. That is the case of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000); in this modern adaptation of Shakespeare's play Hamlet appears as a specter in the guise of the newly-dead CEO of Denmark Corporation. In other cases, the filmmaker may only borrow the subject of the source text, as in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), based on Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness.* Andrew argues that, due to the variety of sources a film can be stemmed from, such as all literature, music, opera, ballet and painting, *borrowing* is certainly the most frequent type of film adaptation found in film productions.

The mode of adaptation Andrew conceives as *intersection* regards those types of films that, within the process of adaptation, strive to retain and capture the

singularities of the source text. In other words, despite the specificities of each medium, in the intersection process the source text is adapted in a way that it is still possible to identify its specificities within the filmic discourse. Pasolini's *Decameron* (1970) is an interesting instance of film intersection – although Pasolini adapted only eight out of the one hundred tales of Boccaccio's book, the viewer can still perceive the story's narrative specificities within the film's structure.

Andrew's third category is called *fidelity of transformation*, and here he argues that being faithful to the structure of a source text is not a difficult task, "for most literary works usually render a large ground of information of the fiction's context, and the basic narrational aspects that shape the narrator's point of view". Thus, by making use of these pieces of information contained in the source text, the filmmaker can certainly keep its structure, which eventually becomes the structure of the adapted film. Conversely, the task that seems quite hard to accomplish, he points out, is "to keep fidelity to the spirit of the source text, to its tone, values, imagery, and rhythm, since finding stylistic equivalents in films for these intangible aspects is the opposite of a mechanical process" (ANDREW, 2000: 32).

Due to films' capacity to incorporate and interrelate elements of all art expressions, film scholars, such as Robert Stam (1992), prefer to approach the study of film adaptation from an intertextual perspective, in which "the text feeds and is fed into an infinitely permutation intertext" (STAM, 1992: 57). Stam's discussions of intertextuality, which apply to approach film adaptations, draw significantly from Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in which every text is interrelated to other texts in an "intersection of textual surfaces" . Bakhtin's ideas have been utilized across a large range of disciplines—linguistics, philosophy, literary theory, and film. Stam, for instance, has certainly been one of the most successful critics to accomplish the use of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism to the cinematic text in order to better understand the kind of "language" that narrative film constructs.

Stam explains that novels and films are types of mediums that have constantly *cannibalized* other genres and mediums. Novels, he argues, started by orchestrating a polyphonic variety of textual materials, from courtly fictions to jestbooks, resulting, then, in countless types of novels such as poetic novels, journalistic novels, cinematic novels, and more recently cyber-novels. Indeed, considering the variety of other genres a literary text such as a novel can encompass, Bakhtin criticizes the literary analysis' tendency to isolate one level or a specific aspect of a work—whether compositional, thematic or linguistic—and study it without resorting to other components, as if the whole meaning of the text was contained within one level of it. Instead, he suggests, "it is only possible to achieve stylistic unity through diverse elements in 'dialogic interaction'" (BAKHTIN, 1994: 120-8). Based on Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, Stam establishes the parallelism between literature and films by asserting that:

> The cinema became a receptacle open to all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all types of collective representation, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite play of influences within cinema, within the other arts, and within culture generally. (STAM, 1992: 61)

Thus, considering the capacity of both literature and films to be in constant interrelation not only with each other, but also with all sorts of arts, intertextual dialogism appears as a very effective approach for studying film adaptations focusing on how historical, economical and social contexts interrelate and influence the relationship between the source text and its film version.

Furthermore, the studies on film adaptation from an intertextual perspective have received a substantial contribution from Gérard Genette's (1982) concept of *hypertextuality*. In his book *Palimpsestes* Genette explores the interrelations between literary works and explains literary devices such as parody, antinovels, pastiches, caricatures, commentary, allusion, and imitation. Genette's major accomplishment lies in his development of the concept of *hypertextuality*, which

accounts for the relationship between one text, called hypertext, to a previous text, hypotext, in which the former transforms, elaborates and expands the latter. In literature there are countless instances of hypertextuality. Chico Buarque's hypertext *A Ópera do Malandro* includes Brecht's hypotext *The Threepenny Opera,* recreating the bohemian atmosphere of the 1940s in a district called Lapa in Rio de Janeiro. Music in Buarque's play is also a rather interesting element of hypertextuality, for it assembles Brazilian popular and folk music along with pieces of famous operas such as *Carmen* and *Aida.* According to Stam, Genette's concept of hypertextuality can be rather useful to the study of film adaptations as they are hypertexts stemmed from "preexisting hypotexts that have been transformed by operations of selection, amplification, concretization and actualization" (GENETTE, 1982: 66). Thus, the notion of hypertextuality permits a considerable understanding of the fluidity and complexity of film adaptation process and may account for why a play such as Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for instance, can generate so many different film versions. Hypertextuality, then, may occur not only in film adaptations in a relationship between written text and film, but also from film to film. Indeed, the influence of one film upon another may occur in relation to technical aspects such as sound, photography, and montage, among others. As Bordwell explains:

> The sense of distortion, for instance, created by the long terrifying shadows in the set design of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) was rapidly absorbed and modified by Hollywood film production in the following decade, like many other devices such as avant-garde music, German Expressionist cinema, Soviet montage cinema (BORDWELL, 1985: 73).

These technical effects and film devices contributed significantly to the construction of the film's narrative sense, and they are just as influential for the construction of film adaptation as any literary device. Besides operating in the realm of narrative structure or film aesthetics as shown above, intertextual relationship can also encompass other aspects such as actors'

and actresses' performances. Stam points out that, in films, "the performer also brings along a kind of baggage, a thespian intertext formed by the totality of antecedent roles" (STAM, 2000: 60).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Indeed, the relations between film adaptations and their sources are a never-ending process of transforming, expanding, and interrelating constantly with other kinds of texts and within films themselves. Thus, as Stam explains, it is a process in which "texts generate other texts with no clear point of origin" (STAM, 2000: 66). Such is the case of *Dial M for Murder*, which was originally written as a television play and then adapted from television to stage, but which only gained popularity through Hitchcock's famous film version (1954). On top of it, film adaptations also interrelate with their historical and social moment, and references to these contexts are frequently reflected in the film's discourse. One interesting instance of this relationship between film adaptations and their social and historical milieu is studied by Raymond Williams in his book *Drama in Performance*, a survey of the conditions under which the same plays have been put on over the years, and how changes in staging practice parallel and reflect developments and changes in society.

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