



## PORTUGUESE LITERATURE AND ADAPTATIONS: THE PARADOX OF LOT'S WIFE, THE ICARUS DILEMMA AND THE QUESTIONING OF LEVIATHAN

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### Abstract:

Literature and Cinema have been linked since the beginning of the history of the seventh art by several connections. The issue of adaptation is one of the main themes that emerged in this context. Portuguese literature is also marked by numerous adaptations of literary texts to the cinema, which aroused different points of view on this phenomenon. The filmmakers themselves have different opinions on this topic, but the so-called criterion of fidelity to the book was soon forgotten and substituted for the recognition of the independence of the film as an aesthetic creation, with the use of expressions such as *transposition* or *equivalence*. Since the inaugural work of Bluestone, the topic of adaptation has raised theoretical approaches and, nowadays, it is increasingly agreed that the phenomenon of adaptation should not be associated with a dependence on the book, but with the reading that director made of the book and how it created a new narrative, told in images.

**Keywords:** Portuguese literature, adaptations, cinema

### 1. Introduction

George Bluestone, in his foundational study, *Novels into Film*, clarifying the concept of adaptation, affirms that both the novel and the film must be seen as distinct and individual entities and that each one can achieve its goals with no more quality whenever they are invoked and explored the specific characteristics of each medium.

However, even though many directors preferred original arguments and did not enter the maze of adaptations, there is a very profound cultural problem that Bluestone translates with a biblical example: *“More often than not, the very prestige and literary charm of classics have an inhibiting effect, shrivelling up the plastic imagination. Like Lot’s wife, the film-maker is frequently immobilized in the very act of looking over his shoulder”* (1957, p. 218.)

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For this author, the paradox of Lot's wife translates into an analysis of the temptation of cinema to look at literature, while at the same time intending, in short, autonomy, without forgetting that there are intersemiotic connections.

Attesting to the first facet of the paradox, Bluestone underlines the numerous connections between literature and cinema, such as the large number of films inspired by literary sources, the attempts of filmmakers to find aesthetic mechanisms similar to the artifices of written text, the effects that the film it promotes the dissemination of the adapted book (sales often increase), and the recognition of the film industry, which cannot be ignored by the Academy Awards.

This connection is proven from the moment that cinema begins to reveal a predilection for literary narrative. Recalling one of the precursors of narrative cinema, Griffith, Bluestone points out his successive adaptations by authors such as Jack London, Tolstoy or Charles Reade.

The reasons that this author points out as elements of proximity highlight the process of aesthetic and semiotic mutation that characterizes adaptation, in a centrifugal sense of artistic manifestations, which is opposed to centripetal movements, to use the image of Imanol Zumalde (1997).

## **2. From the book to the film**

Bluestone, after reflecting on these connections between the film and the book, highlights the main problem in criticizing adaptations. It is not uncommon for comments made on the film to suffer from traditional peccadillo: they have the book as their initial reference. This premise has an inevitable consequence: whenever a film appears through the expression "*adapted from ...*", the inheritance and comparison immediately fall on it, as stated by João Mário Grilo (1995-1996). For this reason, we must analyze both semiotic systems as reciprocal horizons of reference, with a uniform criterion, which excludes the lack of recognition of the film's artistic potential, seen as a mere extension of the literary object, as well as the quite common apocalyptic perspective among men of literature with a spirit of Marshall McLuhan's epigones, according to which the image will succeed the word as regards the social function of the narrative, as Sanchez Noriega (2000) wrote.

Thus, we should not choose the book only as a starting point. This exclusive premise of comparison or any other analysis will collapse in pitfalls such as "fidelity", "deviations", and the subjective problem of "quality of adaptation".

The quality of the adaptation cannot be evaluated according to this pseudo-criteria and, thus, we start from the principle that it is possible to delimit a certain element in the novel and reproduce it mechanically through the image, which, more once, it proves that the film is nothing more than a simple receptacle of the book, which establishes the norm. Much more important is the fact that these changes in the film mean, directly and immediately, an analysis of the "fidelity" of the adaptation, and it is even necessary that the directors try to hide these same changes from the public, under the risk of devaluing their film work.

According to this principle, Neil Syniard believes that a good adaptation is one that manages to be faithful to the spirit and not to the letter of the text, the one that manages to reconcile characteristics of the author and the director - and thus establish a bridge - or even when the camera is used as an element of interpretation of the text and not of its illustration (1986, p. x).

All of these assessment criteria do not show the main operating principle in the analysis of adaptations: the phenomenon that Bluestone calls "*mutation process*". According to this author, most of the critical judgments are not illuminated by what can be defined as "*transcoding procedures*", that is, an analysis of the transformations inherent in the process of mutation from one semiotic system to another, as Carlos Reis points out and Ana Cristina Lopes (1992).

This process is undeniable, leading to inevitable mutations since the transposition of one set of conventions to another will always lead to changes, especially if we leave the linguistic universe behind and enter the visual.

After this entry, we must be aware that the final product will always be different concerning the source and, therefore, from book to film, a distance as great as from ballet to architectural work.

An adapted film becomes distinct from the book that inspired it as painting becomes autonomous in relation to the empirical world that gave rise to it.

Fernando Lopes, the director who adapted several literary texts, defines, in his case, what is essential in an adaptation: "*My adaptations are always made according to what I call a poetics of adaptations. If you read the scene of the consonant in Cardoso Pires' book [O Delfim], my scene is quite different. It is buñueliana, it is a little "viridiana". Besides, it is essential that there is a lot of complicity with the author and the book.*" (2002, p. 29). In opposition to his methodology, the same director states that "*...what exists, in cinema in general, is a mechanics of adaptations, in which everything is done mechanically. There is a book, best seller or not, two or three screenwriters are hired, that is the so-called reinforced concrete argument, a casting is arranged, the film is made and that's it. This is what happens in most adaptations of books for the cinema*" (2002, p. 30).

If in a premeditated and systematic way, it is intended to bring the written word to the screen, we run the risk of, like Ícaro, rising too much, ending up precipitating ourselves in the ground of the denial of the transposition's tangibility, because we wanted to reach the impossible.

In this line of thought, the concept of intersection proposed by Bluestone seems pertinent. This author considers that the novel and the film can be seen as two lines that meet at a certain point, but that later diverge in a process of divergence.

When the meeting point at this aforementioned intersection is analyzed, the book and the script show unavoidable similarities, however, the divergence demonstrates that the lines of approximation, after all, reveal resistance to a process of simple conversion, as well as demonstrating their dissimilarities.

Creating a film from a literary work necessarily implies the construction of a paradigmatic axis with the possibilities that the source and the process offer, in order to build a syntagmatic axis that results from the choices made.

The entire adaptation process will reveal this same set of choices, emphasizing the basic nature of the film as a new creation. Innovations introduced in the film necessarily reflect aesthetic and ideological options.

Eduardo Prado Coelho, commenting on the alteration of the Blade Runner ending, in which the pessimistic sentiment of Philip K. Dick's literary text is replaced by a milder vision of the future, points to a way of dealing with Icarus' dilemma when he says: "*It is true that some of the complexity of Philip K. Dick's text did not remain in Ridley Scott's film. But it should be noted that all changes or deletions work within the logic of the film*" (1984, p. 195). This observation means that often one of the obstacles to adaptation is the process of making the director's choices that are not, above all, faithful to the film itself.

George Bluestone also stated that the film does not suffer from the threat symbolized by Leviathan: "*Nor is the film, like Leviathan, in danger of bogging down in the mud. Since the plastic image is subject to endless variations, it will always defy restriction, will sooner or later break loose to fly on its own*" (1957, p. 217). Bearing this concept in mind, we can argue that cinema does not face the danger of structural dissolution whenever it moves away from literature.

The questioning of cinema through the symbolism of Leviathan makes us think to what extent the film universe has aesthetic consistency per se, in addition to literary contributions.

The history of the seventh art proves the structuring character that literature has always been playing, but it also does not deny the thematic and formal independence of many films.

This structural dilemma is largely combined with the problem of fidelity, the main argument for the appreciation/devaluation of the status of the film work of art. However, most discussions in the universe of adaptation theory have centred above all on the analysis of the original story and the respective "fidelity" of the film, as if the literary text were an untouchable object from which the letter and the spirit derive. which must be found and followed on the screen. This perspective often leads to a non-productive evaluation with the same verdict: the film is not "read" like the book (Chatman, 1990, p. 163).

The philosophy of fidelity provides yet another aspect that deserves our reflection. In a restricted sense, it often reveals itself as an offer of statutory appreciation of the film that is tributary to the book.

If fidelity was already a criterion of quality in times not too distant, today we defend not a fidelity of the letter, but the fidelity of spirit, as Fernando Lopes said, regarding *O Delfim*. The main difficulty was not how he would be faithful to the book by José Cardoso Pires, but to the spirit of the novelist's writing. This was the main aspect to respect because if it had been faithful to the book, it would not have created a film.

The director, invited to testify about the meaning of evaluating a film according to the criterion of fidelity in relation to the book, stated:

*"It doesn't make any sense. It is not even a problem of loyalty. The question is how does a Pollini take a great piano piece and interpret it according to his sensitivity, without betraying it. When Maria João Pires plays the Nocturnos, she is introducing her own emotion, she is reading Chopin's work. This is what I try to do when I make a film adaptation. When António Tabucchi first saw O Fio do Horizonte, he called me from Italy and told me that I had made a metaphysical film when he had made a realistic novel."* (2002, p. 32)

On the question of fidelity, the director Lauro António also emphasizes the concept of "recreation". The filmmaker compares adaptation to a translation exercise. Many try to literally translate a sentence, but this is not possible and, therefore, try to look in the other language for a way to express the same idea, recreating the sentence, with a completely different construction.

The same happens in an adaptation process, given that a novel is constructed in one way and a film in another, dissimilar. In this line of thought, Luís Filipe Rocha, who adapted for in 1995, the novel *Sinais de Fogo*, by Jorge de Sena, argues that the transformation that operated from the book to the screen, namely, the replacement of a first-person narrator by a third-person narrator, using his conception of fidelity: "... fidelity to the author is measured exclusively from fidelity to myself" (2003, p. 38), that is, respect for the inspiring work it is a product of respect for its own (re) creative authenticity.

### 3. Conclusion

In the history of adaptations (Gimferrer, 2002, p. 63), we have found sterile allegiances and fruitful infidelities and, on the other hand, strictly speaking, the objective of presenting a diegesis through another discourse is itself a phenomenon of infidelity.

Furthermore, as we have already said, any value judgment in a comparison between a film and a book results in another inconsistency, because we are working with different and heterogeneous discourses, which should not and cannot be hierarchized due to their distinct semiotic nature.

We verify that the most recent proposals for the analysis of the phenomenon of adaptation obliterate the concepts of fidelity and Bazinian equivalence, proposing as analysis vectors the individual characteristics of the person responsible for the adaptation, the aesthetic context, the historical, social and cultural contexts, and the specific elements of narrative and enunciative character inherent in film discourse.

In summary, adaptation must be seen as a complex universe and although the paradox of Lot's wife, the dilemma of Icarus and the questioning of Leviathan appears as threatening spectres, this phenomenon should always be illuminated by aesthetic

independence and freedom of paths of reading that a book, by nature, offers in the processes of semiotic transmutation.

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