# Literature and Film Adaptations: Between the Abyss and the Flight of Icarus

L. Cardoso

*Abstract*—Our main objective is to discuss the process of adapting a novel to a film, taking into account the semiotic and cultural systems that separate and/or unite Literature and Cinema. The traditional discussions about adaptations lead researchers to the so-called "fidelity" problem, regarding the film as a faithful heritage of the writer's novel. Nowadays, researchers focus the semiotic arguments upon the (re)creation process and the independence of the film. Nevertheless, it is still common to find adaptation analysis connected to the "fidelity" criterium that values an adaptation when the film is very close to the original book. On the other hand, when there is a clear frontier between novel and film, researchers and critics still found themselves between the abyss and the Icarus metaphor to explain how the adaptation is valued.

*Keywords*— Literature, Film Adaptation, Adaptation Theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the universe of adaptations, we find a very complex problem that is not simple to understand or ready to solve. When a director decides to adapt a text, he engages in a chimerical journey, since, by semiotic nature in the strict sense, an adaptation can never be total. In this sense, any attempt is irremediably condemned to constitute a partial vision, an interpretation or a reading.

As noted by Jakob Lothe (2000), the entire adaptation process implies deliberate choices on the part of the agents involved in the transposition. Such actions lead to interpretation and comparison exercises, mainly by the public, or as Lothe tells us, an adaptation becomes a reductionist process, because it illustrates a single representation at the visual level, but it provides different interpretations to the spectators, or that is, it allows them to make a more or less positive assessment of the process. Adaptation is today an object of complex study and with many points of view in theoretical research, as Vergara writes (2015):

> Due to the attention adaptations have received academically, the number of scholars studying film adaptation and developing new research and theories has increased— a phenomenon which has led to the rise in studies and frameworks towards cinematic adaptations and its relation to literature. This new dawn has also led to the development of new categories and frameworks particularly focused on analysis. Although some researchers have dedicated to the study of fidelity, there have been others interested in the descriptive analysis of such adaptations, that is, research embedded with the ideas of Gideon Toury and the influence of an empirical, descriptive (how it is) rather than prescriptive (how it should be) approach… (Vergara, 2015, p. 156)

On the other hand, Catrysse (2018) highlights the study that can be done on the brands of adaptation, identifying them explicitly or implicitly:

> Following the aforesaid proposals, a descriptive study of adaptation may look into whether and how (sets of) movies are presented and/or perceived as literary, or in this case, as historical film adaptations. Put differently, one may examine if, how and why movies highlight or hide links with previous literary or historical source materials. To discuss these questions, the intertextuality concept of "markers" (Broich) may be helpful (Cattrysse, "Vertaling, Adaptatie En Intertekstualiteit"). Markers may be explicit or implicit: whereas the latter requires specific previous knowledge from the audience, the former does not. Markers can be spotted in different (e.g. textual, peri-textual, para-textual, meta-textual, and extra-textual) places, and at different times. Typical peri-textual markers are the "based on a true story"-tag and the "fictitious persons"-disclaimer inserted in the credits preceding or following a book or movie. Whereas the former seems to factualize fiction, the latter appears to fictionalize facts. (Catrysse, 2018, 3)

Furthermore, an analysis of dichotomous outlines arises, given that a film that is an adaptation of a book can be understood and interpreted differently by those who see it - whether they know the original work or not. However, for everyone who knows the literary text, the analysis of the film will inevitably include a degree of comparative evaluation with the source. Such a comparison becomes understandable and given the explicit differences between the two media, the film version often seems inferior to the literary matrix. For this reason, Hanssen, E. & Gjelsvik, A. & Bruhn, J. (2013) mention five main issues when we study adaptations:

L. Cardoso is with the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre (Portugal) with the Department of Languages and Communication

Five characteristic theoretical and analytical clusters are predominant in current adaptation research (…) First is the question of fidelity, which adaptation studies universally addresses. Second is the attempt to open up the field to a broader variety of media relations beyond the usual novel-to-film relationship. A third important trend is a way that some contributors consider adaptation as a multilevel rather than a one-to-one relationship (for example, one poem interpreted into one painting). Fourth, the book probes the idea that adaptations may not be a one-way transport from source to result, but a two-way, dialogic process. Finally, some chapters examine the way that global theoretical frameworks (intermediality or genetic criticism, for example) can be used in adaptation studies. (2013, p. 5 – 6)

A perfect fit is a perfect chimaera. Nevertheless, the director can try to elevate his work in "challenge to the gods" of Semiotics. If in a premeditated and systematic way, it is intended to bring the written word to the screen, we not only challenge the "gods", because we cannot reach the unreachable - the perfect translation of a semiotic system by another semiotic system -, as we run the risk of, like Ícaro, rising too high, ending up falling into the ground of the denial of the transposition's tangibility, because we wanted to achieve the impossible.

In this line of thought, the concept of intersection proposed by Bluestone (1957) seems relevant. 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.

In reality, it is not possible to define or find an ideal of adaptation. No film can be identified as a perfect adaptation process, given that it suffers from an intrinsic contradiction: there is no perfect adaptation because it is not possible to make a perfect adaptation if we think of the traditional meaning of this word. Nor would an absolute conversion from a book to a film be possible without disturbing or even destroying the essence of the genetic work.

Such obstacles are visible in "faithful" adaptations of a Proust or Joyce, just as the reverse process would be truly absurd: imagine a "faithful" adaptation of a Chaplin film for a novel, for example. According to the philosophy of parallel lines, we cannot fail to invoke Bergman's opinion again, which has already been criticized by us before, when he says that:

Film has nothing to do with literature; the character and substance of the two art forms are usually in conflict...We should avoid making films out of books.

The irrational dimension of a literary work, the germ of its existence, is often untranslatable into visual terms – and it, in turn, destroys the special, irrational dimensions of the film (Wagner, 1975, p 29)

Undoubtedly, the history of adaptations is tainted by countless failures, especially when the original book is dominated by intrinsically literary characteristics such as the inner monologue, or the free indirect speech, but not for that reason certain authors marked by a dimension of reflection or interiority, like Conrad or Pöe, have stopped attracting filmmakers.

These difficulties are denounced by countless agents of the cinematographic universe, from directors to screenwriters. The critics' position can be summarized as follows: "transferring" a work of art from one medium to another is impossible. It is not possible to "film a book" so that the characters of the literary text would rise from the book and become actors in front of the camera. This view exemplifies the impossibility of a "transfer" and identifies the temptation of reductionism that often eludes the director who seeks a synthesis of the original work and finds a simplification with its respective aesthetic costs.

Reflecting on the issue of difficulties in adapting, Gimferrer (2000) identifies two main obstacles: the equivalence of language and the problem of equivalence of the result that is obtained, according to the language.

Due to these factors, the comparison between the book and the film is often the cradle of spurious disputes that forget the essence of the issue rooted in different languages, and the aesthetic validity of the film work, which must be analyzed independently concerning the literary work. The problem of adaptation is not only in the narrative language that one chooses to adapt, nor in the qualitative analysis of the result obtained. This last factor is more relevant when we weigh the value of a film but of a film per se, and not of the value as an adaptation.

This erroneous perspective that is identified by Gimferrer, has been responsible, according to this author, for the great majority of the adaptations of great novels of the 20th century to have resulted in failures and disappointments, which accentuates the growing divorce in the contemporary era between the novel and the film.

Such a divorce is also the result of a growing process of reflection on the adaptation process, both from the creative and the critical side. In this regard, cinema experienced, in the first place, a period of idyll between the book and the film, which culminated in Samuel Goldwyn's effort to recruit writers directly, instead of buying his books. Such a policy, however, would prove to be a complete failure. The writers, unable or disinterested in writing with images in mind, united their voices to denounce the humiliating way in which the argument department was able to destroy the essence of the text, by removing the elements that it judged for the visualization and film continuity sheets. important (Frost, 1998).

In a later phase, there is the emergence of criticism of semiotic and narratological content that allowed to identify lines of convergence and divergence between the two universes. For example, one of the main instances of reflection is that the relationships between the text and the image do not contemplate only connections about the signs, but also different relationships between the meaning and the signifier that the viewer must interpret and construct as a recipient, with the full awareness that it analyzes a dialogue.

A confrontation between words and images, regarding translation problems that pose a film adaptation of a novel, or a novel of films, highlights a question similar to the translation from one language to another: what is played in this process it is more than a game of equivalences, it is the confrontation between two views of the world (Clerc, 1993).

In this search for identification between the film work and the literary source, another reason for the unhappiness of the transposition is, curiously, the director's declaration that, deliberately, projects the realization of work faithful to the original. This declaration of intent, as bold as it is virtually impossible, finds a perfect example in Visconti's proposal to faithfully adapt Camus's The Foreigner. Paradoxically, Visconti's failure lies in its pseudo-quality: the desire to be faithful to the text. It is that in each frame of Visconti there seems to be more descriptive details of the place where the story takes place than in the author's own novel (Winston, 1973), that is, the specific qualities of cinema originated a process of infidelity, within of a process that would, ideally, be faithful.

Winston, analyzing another example of deliberate fidelity, Bresson's famous adaptation of Bernanos's novel, recalls that the director intended to follow the novel sentence by sentence, without adding any other element. This stance deserved criticism from Bazin, who classified this option as a betrayal of the text by default. He also criticized the fact that he did not select the moments of the novel that were closest to a visualization - which would entail a sacrifice by the more literary segments - resulting in another type of paradox: the novel remains full of visual moments, while the film reveals truly literary.

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 changes 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 Ícaro's 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 »(Coelho, 1984,

p.195). This observation means that often one of the obstacles to adaptation is the process of making the director's choices, which are not, above all, faithful to the film itself.

The difficulties we mentioned could indicate a departure from filmmakers from literature as a source, especially when we approach the classics. However, these adaptations of classic works are usually a reason for prestige, as assumed by Heidi Kaye and Imelda Whelehan (2000) or Giddens et alii (1990) and, as a result, a transposition is always an acceptable risk, or if it were not true that three-quarters of the Oscars for Best Picture were awarded to adaptations.

As an acceptable risk, an adaptation truly is between the abyss of criticism due to the ghost of the original novel and the challenging flight of Icarus, when the director wants to leave fidelity behind and create a new work of art

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**L. Cardoso** was born in Viseu (Portugal) in 1969. After concluding the Humanities degree at the Catholic University in 1991, he concluded a Master in Classic Literatures at Coimbra University, in 1996. In 2007 he concluded his PhD in Modern Languages and Literatures at Coimbra University (Portugal). After teaching for four years in secondary schools, he began teaching at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu in 1995 until 2008, when he moved to the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre as Adjunct Professor. He was elected Dean of the School of Education and Social Sciences in 2010 until february 2018, completing the two mandates permitted by law. Since 2015 until May, 2018, he was also President of ARIPESE – the

Association for Reflexion and Intervention in Higher Schools Polytics. Main interests in teaching and investigation include Science and Communication Languages, Literature and Cinema, and Management of Higher Education Universities. In 2016, he published *Literature and Cinema: the look of Janus. Vergílio Ferreira and the space of the unspeakable*. Prof. Dr. Cardoso was the national coordinator for the Bologna Process in Polytechnics in Media and Communication Sciences. He is a member of several international organizations concerning Education, Communication, Comparative Literature, Narratology, Film Studies and Higher Education Management and reviewer of several international journals. He has published several papers in national and international journals with peer review and is a member of C3i - *Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre* and of the *Centre for Comparative Studies of the University of Lisbon.*