

# Portuguese Literature and Film Adaptations: The Birth of a Concept

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**Abstract**—Our main objective is to study the close connection between Portuguese Literature and Cinema, giving birth to the adaptation phenomenon. The key issue in this paper is to discuss the birth of the adaptation concept and highlight the first theories about adaptation studies, since Bluestone, who established the first landmarks about the concept. The adaptation phenomenon is still a complex web of theories, research studies and approaches from different domains, but the most important issue is the birth of the concept, since the early relations between literature and film.

**Keywords**— Portuguese Literature, Film Adaptation, Adaptation Theory.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the birth of cinema as art, literature has given the so-called seventh art numerous narratives, theatre or poems that were used as the basis for making films. With this link between literature and cinema, a problematic concept is born and which is still debated today: adaptation. Portuguese cinema also found in literature an inexhaustible source for making films, often inspired by highly regarded books and known to the public. As Akmese (2019) wrote:

Cinema is in interaction with all the branches of art that existed before it. Among these branches of art, literature is the one it interacts with the most. This strong relationship between literature and cinema stems from their ability to explain the topics they deal with in detail. Since both fields of art are nourished by similar dynamics, many works have been adapted from literature to cinema. The first adaptation from literature to cinema in history is Melies's movie *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), which was inspired by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells's books; this film is followed by many more adaptations, the film *A Trip to the Moon* has an important place in the history of cinema as it is both the first adaptation and the first example of the science fiction genre. Today, the technique of adapting from literature to cinema is among the methods used by many directors. (2019, p. 1)

At the end of the 19th century, cinema arrived in Portugal and soon began a path similar to the French one. After a period very

close to the Lumière brothers, the filmmakers begin to adapt to the cinema the narratives of consecrated and respected Portuguese literature. As Costa writes:

That is how, at the beginning of 1919, a more ambitious tape started shooting, adapted from a very popular novel by Manuel Maria Rodrigues: *A Rosa do Adro*. It is believed, at Invicta, that production must rely on national literature to guarantee the commercial success of its films with the popularity that they enjoyed certain literary works. Not only minor works: Eça, Camilo, Júlio Dinis, Abel Botelho, are authors who can ensure the public's interest. «O Primo Basílio», «Amor de Perdição», «Os Fidalgos da Casa Mourisca», «Mulheres da Beira» are part of the Invicta Film production projects. It is certain that, from the works of these novelists, in its transposition to the cinema, little more than illustration will remain, losing much of what they represent as painting and analysis of a society and an era. The conflict is kept intact, but its deep motivations are diluted. George Pallu's most successful work will still be *Os Fidalgos da Casa Mourisca*, of simpler problematic: clashes of feelings correlated with the confrontation of decadence, caste prejudices, traditionalism, and the idleness of a provincial aristocracy to sink, with the emancipation of the rural worker, in an outline of class struggle that has been sweetened and conciliatory since the original work. From Camilo or Eça, little more will be retained than the anecdotal warp of two of his most famous works. What, moreover, would happen later when Camilo, Eça and Júlio Dinis were taken over by Portuguese directors and when cinema had already another maturity. (1978, p. 27 – 28)

Recently, the most famous examples of adaptations of Portuguese literature to the cinema include novels by highly respected authors: *Blindness* (2003), *Mysterries of Lisbon* (2010), *Os Maias* (2014), *O Homem Duplicado* (2014), *Pilgrimage* (2017), *Aparição* (2018), or the *Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (2020).

However, in the genesis of all adaptations, there is a process of metamorphosis from literature to cinema: the phenomenon of adaptation. As Cattrysse (2018) points out:

... 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 actualize fiction, the latter appears to fictionalize facts. (2018, p. 3)

Jean-Claude Carrière, reflecting on the relationship between literature and cinema, argues that the film narrative cannot ostracize the legacies of the literary text. Furthermore, in the cinema, the adaptation process is one of its intrinsic characteristics, similar to different communicative phenomena that include the action of a decoding subject. Carrière writes: «Qu' on me demande de chercher une histoire dans un roman, qu' on me raconte un fait divers, un souvenir personnel, que je fouille dans ma propre mémoire, ou dans mon "imagination", que j' écoute simplement les milliards de particules invisibles qui traversent à chaque instant l' endroit où je me trouve, de toute manière mon travail sera une adaptation. Il faudra que je transforme cette idée vague, ou ce livre, ou cette anecdote, en un film (...).» (1990, p. 7)

In this perspective, we identified a set of problems that are awakened by cinematographic adaptation: the relationships between two different semiotic systems (literature and cinema), the adaptation processes, the agents of adaptation, and the question of fidelity in adaptation. These will be some of the structuring vectors of this reflection.

In the genesis of these questions, we find an essential problem. João Mário Grilo identifies it as a premise that distorts the analysis of adaptation, since the elucidation of literary adaptations is often reduced to the analysis of the film, according to the literary semiology, and to the evaluation of the argument in a narrative reductionist logic, which leads you to a set of questions. First, we ask what the status of cinema is, especially when an analysis of a film is initiated in a logic of dependence on a literary source (Grilo, 1995).

With this stance, we find a methodological "sin" with a strong historical tradition in the analysis of the relationship between literature and cinema: placing the film in explicit dependence on the literary text. Such a perspective contains a preambular addiction that affects the development of any analysis.

The secondary cation of one universe concerning another only allows a reflection of valorization/devaluation about the starting

point, preventing an autonomous characterization of each semiotic system per se. Recalling previous studies, it should be noted that the denial of any type of hierarchy had already been defended by Bazin, when he presented the concept of cinema as "impure art", enabling the discovery of the true path to follow in the cosmos of adaptations: making cinema autonomous as an art form and creative process.

We must also assess the alleged inheritance of the entire film that is adapted, given that it brings a value judgment on the process itself, giving rise to deeply subjective classifications. According to a classic Hollywood cinema convention, only a set of films, adaptations of great literary works, deserved to be considered legitimate and of quality, and, in this perspective, cinema was only a stage for the consecration of literature.

Thus, Macbeth and Henry V would be "quality" adaptations, from an unquestionable heritage, as opposed to Stagecoach (based on Ernest Haycox's "Stage to Lordsburg" booklet) or - to continue with John Ford - My Darling Clementine (adapted from "Wyatt Earp, Frontier Marshall", by Stuart N. Lake). This classification reveals a dubious "cultural" ideology, common to cinema, theory and criticism, responsible for the typification of films and their inheritances.

We must try to reflect on the issues of adaptation according to an approach that does not favour a taxonomy of cinema based on literature. In this perspective, João Mário Grilo defends two central ideas. First of all, cinema does not film books, that is, since the Lumière brothers, the camera institutes with what films a unique relationship that cannot be replaced by literature. On the other hand, we must choose the loss of referentiality of the book concerning the film as an aesthetic criterion, which gradually becomes autonomous until it is removed. Second, the problem of adaptation is very relevant for cinema if it is analyzed according to the problem of infidelity and not according to fidelity.

This dichotomy takes up the eternal question of the aesthetic status of cinema. If at the dawn of its history, cinema saw literature as a prestigious means of cultural affirmation, it also soon found a fertile vein of thematic and formal inspiration.

Although the book and the film are disparate semiotic entities, the sharing of certain characteristics causes the creation of connections that are strengthened in the face of the traditional status of literature.

George Bluestone, commenting on this theme, states that both the novel and the film should be seen as distinct and individual entities and that each one achieves its objectives with more quality whenever the specific characteristics of each medium are invoked and explored.

However, although many directors may prefer original arguments and not 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, shriveling 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). For this author, the paradox of Lot's wife translates into the 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 links 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 provokes 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 narrative. Recalling one of the precursors of narrative cinema, Griffith, Bluestone points out his successive adaptations: Jack London, Tolstoy, and 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.

George Bluestone also presents a set of data that emphasizes the relevance of literary sources. As early as 1934, about a third of RKO, Paramount and Universal's production was inspired by novels.

Lester Asheim indicates that, of 5807 productions between 1935 and 1945, 976 were made from novels. Hortense Powdermaker, in 1947, indicates that, of 463 arguments in production, about 40% were adapted from novels. In 1955, Thomas Pryor stated that the original arguments, in that year, only reached 51.8%. These data, already distant in time, can be substantiated by current Hollywood politics, during its classic period, of acquiring the "literary properties" of short stories, novels or novels before being published, some of which were never even printed.

Linda Seger (2000, pp. 296-298.), Analyzing 63 films that won the Oscar for Best Film, identifies 33 inspired by novels and 9 in plays. Moreover, in addition to concluding that the aforementioned films constitute 85% per cent of the awarded works, it states that 45% of the films for television are adaptations, with seventy per cent of these adaptations having already earned the Emmy Award. The same author points out that 83% of mini-series are also adaptations, and 95% of them have already received the aforementioned prize.

Alfonso Méndiz, in the prologue to Seger's work, also stresses that about thirty to forty per cent of the films produced annually has a literary source, and if we consider films that are inspired by biographies, the percentage rises to 50%. all world production.

Fernando Lopes, a Portuguese director, considered, already in 2002, that a large part of the world production is based on books, mainly novels, because from these he already defines a narrative base, a dramaturgy scheme and a group of characters (Luís, 2002, p. 29).

Recent data is provided, for example, by the Missouri State Mid-Continent Library. According to this institution, from the 1980s to the present day, more than 800 films inspired by literary sources have been recorded. Between the public and Hollywood Oscars, films based on literary works have always been very well received. Bluestone cites Time magazine, which rated Birth of a Nation as the best silent film and Gone With The Wind as the best film of all time, according to a popular query.

The economic interest of the film industry also welcomes films adapted from novels. As early as 1955, five of the ten most profitable films were adaptations (*Gone with the Wind*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Duel in the Sun*, *The Robe*, and *Quo Vadis*).

The Pulitzer Prizes have also won many films (*The Good Earth*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Late George Apley*, *The Yearling*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Bell for Adano*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *So Big*, *Arrowsmith*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Alice Adams*) with literary inspiration, which proves the union between commercial and artistic success.

On the other hand, the film's success often led to a commercial appreciation of the novel. When David Copperfield appeared in theatres, the demand for the book was so high that the Cleveland Public Library purchased 132 copies; the film *The Good Earth* sent sales of the respective book to 3000 per week; more copies of *Wuthering Heights* were sold after the film's premiere than during the previous ninety-two years; and the Pocket Book editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lost Horizon* rose to more than 300,000 copies and 1,400,000, respectively, after the film versions were made.

The Mexican film *El Crimen del Padre Amaro*, directed by Carlos Carrera, premiered in 2002, relaunched the name of the Portuguese writer Eça de Queirós. In Mexico alone, where the film was released, the reissue of the novel by the Portuguese author reached a circulation of 3000 copies that sold out in three days, which forced Editora Ave Fénix to immediately prepare a new edition of another 5000 copies (Fernandes, 2002). In fact, the importance of books adapted to the cinema is enormous, as Perdikaki (2018) writes:

Adaptations play a crucial part in the contemporary creative industries. Amid the different types of adaptation, film adaptation is a motoring force in modern-day creative industries. For example, novels and comic books often serve as presold properties and proliferate film productions. Film adaptation has been considered as a genre in its own right and, according to some scholars, as the defining genre of American film production (cf. Cartmell 2010; Leitch 2008). The process of transposing a literary work onto the big screen is often discussed in translational terms and research in Adaptation Studies has touched upon the similarities between translation and adaptation as creative processes and as cultural phenomena. More specifically, Cattrysse (2014: 47-49) builds on 1970s polysystem theories in order to highlight the common characteristics between translation and adaptation as processes and products. He observes that both involve the interaction of users with texts in a socio-temporally defined context and argues that both are teleological processes, in that they are influenced by source and target (con)text conditioners, the latter of which play a pivotal role in the overall decision-making. (2018, p. 169)

From this brief exhibition results the evidence of the basic character of the adaptations in the cinematographic universe. The relevance of adaptation can be justified by a very varied set of factors. The main reasons that justify the use of adaptations are the need felt early by filmmakers to find stories, the guarantee of commercial success (a film inspired by a novel usually attracts the public), the use of the novel due to its ability to act as a filter from a historical moment, the desire to transpose emblematic literary works or myths to the canvas, the cultural and artistic prestige that an adaptation gains among the audience, and the capacity that cinema has to disseminate and amplify a literary work (2000, pp. 50-52).

Bluestone, after reflecting on these connections between the film and the book, highlights the main problem in criticizing adaptations. It is not uncommon for the comments made on the film to suffer from the peccadillo we have already identified: they have the book as their initial reference. This premise has an inevitable consequence: whenever a film appears through the expression "adapted from ...", the stigmas of inheritance and comparison are immediately cast upon it.

For this reason, we must analyze both narrative 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 apocalyptic perspective, quite common among men of literature with the spirit of Marshall McLuhan's disciples, according to which the image will succeed the word as far as the social function of the narrative is concerned.

We should not choose the book as a starting point only. 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 assessed 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, again instead, it proves that the film is nothing more than a simple receptacle for the book, which establishes the norm. We only understand deviations in adaptations as merely technical needs, such as the time that the film itself cannot, in theory, exceed. On the literary origin of the adaptations, Akmesé (2019) wrote:

Literature is the area of art most intertwined with the cinema. This relationship between literature and cinema relies on the characteristic trait of novels and films which allow both to explain in detail the themes which are introduced by them. The fact that the main theme of both forms of art pertains to life and that both are nurtured by similar dynamics and based on fiction, paves the way for several literary works to be adapted to films. The point of departure of this study relates to adaptations where the interaction between cinema and literature is persistently observed. Adaptation from literature to cinema can be briefly described as the reconfiguration of a literary work for a cinema film and the writing of a script based on a novel or a story, which was

authored previously with no specific purpose of being adapted to film, by approaching the novel or story from the perspective of narrative cinema art (Bolat, 2019, pp. 512-513). Since the beginning of the art of cinema, quite a few classical and popular novels have been filmed. However, this does not necessarily imply that these cinema films reflect on a one-to-one basis the novels that they are adapted from. How the literary work to be adapted to the film is reconfigured and whether this literary work serves as the basis of direct adaptation or inspiration are matters of particular importance in view of the nature of the relationship established between the novel and the film (Boz, 2014, p. 113). (2019, p. 5)

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 filmmakers try to hide these same changes from the public, under pain of devaluing their film work. According to this principle, Neil Syniard (1986, p. X) believes that a good adaptation is one that can be faithful to the spirit and not to the letter of the text, the one that can 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. According to this ideal, many scriptwriters were governed. This was the case of Daniel Taradash who sought the basic premise of the written text and then worked on it, avoiding the obvious, the possible intentions of the author, or the criterion of fidelity to the original written, which transforms the screenwriter into an interpreter and not an agent of pure reproduction. The issue of relations between the original and the film is highlighted by Perdikaki (2018):

Adaptations affirm their value as creative entities through reinterpreting the source material and assigning new messages to it. Such reinterpretation is inextricably linked with the adapters' creative vision and individual intertexts. Adaptation is a context-dependent process which draws its meaning from the readings (and/or viewings) afforded in the given socio-temporal and cultural context. Casetti (2004) posits literature and film as sites where discourses are produced and circulated, and thus signify meanings considered as possible (thinkable) and feasible (legitimate) by the given sociocultural community. Therefore, adaptations do not deal merely with texts but with the complex meanings conveyed by texts in different contexts and to different target audiences. This in turn creates a dialogue between text and context and also enriches the identity of the source text, which harks back to the hermeneutic motion present in adaptation. (2018, p. 173)

All of these evaluation 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 critical judgments are not illuminated by what can be defined as “transcoding procedures” (Reis & Lopes, 1997), that is, an analysis of the transformations inherent to the process of mutation from a semiotic system to other. As Perdikaki wrote (2018):

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This process is undeniable, resulting in 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 the entry, we must be aware that the final product will always be different about the source and, thus, 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 about the empirical world that gave rise to it.

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