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“In the Script It Is Written and On the Screen It’s Pictures”:
Teaching Intertextual Adaptation in Alberto Moravia and
Jean-Luc Godard’s Contempts via Rosario Castellanos’s
“Chess”



Abstract

The goal of this videographic moving poem is to explore teaching adaptation as an intertextual dialogism through Alberto Moravia and Jean-Luc Godard's versions of *Contempt* (1954, 1963) by juxtaposing those texts with a third – Rosario Castellano's poem "Chess." This juxtaposition is not only a further illustration of already inherent quality of both original texts' reflections on Homer's *The Odyssey*, but also attempts to highlight and reframe a distinction facet of Godard's adaptation: female subjectivity.

Keywords: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Moving Poem, Jean-Luc Godard, Alberto Moravia, Rosario Castellanos.

Academic guiding text

One of the challenges I have encountered in my graduate seminar focused on Film and Literature is getting my students to think beyond debates of textual fidelity. It makes sense - I teach at a small, regional, university where most of my students are K-12 (primary-secondary school) English teachers that are taking graduate courses for continuing education credits. I typically start the course with a screening of Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002), an unorthodox adaptation of Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* (1994), which I pair with Jason Mittell's thoughtful and incredibly funny videographic work "*Adaptation. 's Anomalies*" (2016). Mittell's work highlights the unique hall of mirrors of intertextuality at work in the film, which ping-pongs Orlean's book off of Charlie Kaufman and the fictitious Donald Kaufman's screenplay and, in so doing, forces us to think of the final film on a meta level. It is a heady concept to begin the course with for many of them and they struggle with moving beyond the only way they have often thought about and taught adaptation in their own classes.

In the handful of times I have taught the class over the past decade, I have tried to brainstorm new approaches to make intertextuality more tangible to the students, particularly by the time I get to the end of the class where I pair Alberto Moravia's novel *Il Disprezzo* (*Contempt*, 1954), Jean-Luc Godard's film adaptation (1963), and Robert Stam's significant intervention in the field of adaptation studies, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation". Most recently, I tried an assignment where I ask students to propose their own adaptation where

they consider the various contexts at work in the production process. For instance, I ask them to consider how using generic shorthand or how the casting of a particular actor or actress can automatically charge the adaptation with additional meanings not necessarily found in the original text and how they can harness those associations creatively.

While it is a decent enough assignment prompt on paper, it can still be a bit abstract for the students who approach adaptations primarily through a literature framework instead of a cinematic framework (my class is sometimes the first film course some of the students have ever taken). Recently, I found a potential solution while in attendance at the 2023 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference when I saw Evelyn Kreutzer screen one of her moving poems on a panel about the voice in videographic criticism. As set out in her submission to this special issue, Evelyn's Moving Poems project is largely focused on adapting poems videographically, repurposing a film like Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) to represent Ernst Jandl's 1950 poem "Schtzngrmm" (Kreutzer, 2022). By the nature of the project - not being a one-to-one adaptation - it's automatically intertextual in nature and it already utilizes another literary format many of my students are already familiar with.

As I sat in my chair and watched Evelyn's video, Rosario Castellanos's poem "Chess" instantly sprang to mind - a poem that I incidentally discovered while in A.P. English class after going through my first break up. You see, one of the obstacles in the pairing of Moravia, Godard, and Stam is the unique Russian nesting doll nature of the texts. Moravia is adapting Homer's *The Odyssey* and Godard is adapting Moravia's adaptation of Homer while both texts are foregrounding the futility of adaptation. Like the Orlean, Kaufman, Jonze combination that I start the course with, the story we are reading or watching about the act of adaptation of a previous text is also functioning as an adaptation of that text. In short, in addition to being a story about a screenwriter experiencing a career crisis where he is torn between the worlds of art and commerce while writing an adaptation of *The Odyssey*, *Contempt* is also a meta-adaptation of *The Odyssey*. Thus, I proposed making an intertextual adaptation of Castellanos' poem using *Contempt*, leaning into the similarities between the two texts, to help my students navigate the various texts and the concept of intertextuality.

With regard to intertextuality, much of Stam's article focuses on the Moravia-Godard pairing, a pairing that "can be seen as a mediation on the richly ambiguous nature of all translation and adaptation. At the same time, the film suggests, art renews itself through creative mistranslation" (Stam, 2000, p. 62). Stam's overall objective is to shift the dominant discourse of adaptation away from a criterion of fidelity because, as Moravia's protagonist and Godard's film also posit, it is ultimately an impossible pursuit. As Stam pointedly asks his reader before considering all the ways in which medium specificity and intentionality fog the objective character of the text, "Fidelity to what?" (Stam, 2000, p. 57). Instead, Stam advocates for a theory of adaptation that breaks away from measuring an adaptation against his source text towards a consideration of how adaptations participate in "intertextual dialogism" where "the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, which read the text not only through recognizable influence, but also through a subtle process of dissemination" (Stam, 2000, p. 64). In other words, adaptations can be considered dialogues between networks of texts, some recognizable and obvious, some less so. As Stam writes, "Film adaptations, then, are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin" (Stam, 2000, p. 66).

Thus, Moravia, Godard, and Stam are already an obvious fit. Why choose Castellanos's poem to make the concept of "intertextual dialogism" concrete? Most obviously, both Castellanos's poem and Godard's film share the narrative of the gradual degradation of a relationship, and draw upon the symbolic prominence of Kings and Queens. Secondly, Raoul Coutard's lateral camera movements render the apartment of Godard's film into a battlefield not unlike a Chess board. Third, both texts are defined by mind games, where Emilia/Camille constantly dangles and alludes to the reason why she despises her husband, testing his love by asking him to self-reflect regarding his intentions and yet he cannot see. It was this final aspect I particularly wanted to explore and emphasize by choosing a female poet, whose original poem was written in Spanish.

I also chose in my adaptation - again, thanks to Evelyn's panel which also highlighted the role of conflicting voiceovers in videographic work - to attempt to use Godard's polyglot device to make my own interpretive intervention into the pairing. Godard's film has sometimes been seen by critics as being misogynistic, even inspiring a disclaimer on the most recent StudioCanal 4K release ("Please note that this film reflects historical attitudes which audiences may find outdated or offensive."). I believe this interpretation arises partially from a misinterpretation of Godard's filmmaking style - the film famously begins with a long scene showcasing Camille's (Bridgette Bardot) naked body, which was insisted upon by his producer and Godard attempted to abstract through the use of colored filters in his classic Brechtian way - but also from his gesture at providing her character with interiority. Essentially, the misogyny in Moravia's novel - due to its firm tie to the exclusively first-person narration - becomes clearly attributable to its unreliable male narrator. In the film, due to Godard's occasional shift outside of Paul's (Michel Piccoli) point-of-view, the foundation becomes more ambiguous. Thus, to try to rehabilitate the narrational shift Godard attempts, I chose to have the Castellanos's poem read in four languages: English (by a myself, a male voice), Italian (the language of the novel, read by two women), French (the dominant language of Godard's film), and Spanish (the original language of Castellanos's poem). Like the varying interpretations of *The Odyssey*, I chose to structurally have them compete for meaning, pairing the readings with specific scenes from the film to encourage a reframing of meaning. To draw more attention to this competition for meaning, I leaned into the primary colors of the film and coded the male voice with blue colored subtitles and the female voices with red. My adaptation begins with a male point of view dominating the opening section, mirroring that of Paul's interpretation of his marriage (in English), only to encounter disruption in a he said/she said second act (where the poem is read in both the native languages of the novel and the poem - Italian and Spanish), and finally a complete reversal that attempts to capture Camille's subjectivity (there the poem is read in Camille's native tongue - French).

In close, it is my hope that this moving poem assists in enacting Stam's notion of intertextual dialogism by juxtaposing Godard's film with Castellanos's poem while simultaneously highlighting one of Godard's main creative interventions in his adaptation. I also would

advocate for assigning students more creative alternatives in Literature and Film classes like moving poem adaptations in order to better understand adaptation theory from a more tangible perspective.

About the author

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