From "Adaptation" to Re-creation: Literature and Cinema Coping with the Complexity of Human Recollection

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"Adaptation"

A Brief Survey

The *adaptation* of literature to film — we all know what it is, don't we? Federico Fellini put it most succinctly (in 1983):

> What can one get from a book? Plot. But plot itself has no significance. (Fellini 1988: 28)[1]

Shklovskij put it most figuratively — *and* unkindly (in 1923):

> Sure, one can give a man a trombone and then tell him: "Now play the Kazan cathedral on this"; but that will be either jest or ignorance.[2]

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[1] Che cosa si prende da un libro? Delle situazioni. Ma le situazioni, di per sé, non hanno alcun significato. (Fellini 1983: 23-24)

[2] My translation. "Конечно, можно дать человеку тромбон и сказать 'Сыграйте на нём Казанский собор', но это будет или шутка или невежество" (Shklovskii 1923: 21). I have been unable to locate an English edition of this text; there is an Italian translation (Shklovskii 1987: 115).

Mitry put it most damningly (in 1963):

> the story [of the original piece of literature] is followed step by step [...] The film [is] never anything more than a vehicle. (Mitry 1997: 328)[3]

And Stam put it in the most complete — but, also, the most complicated — terms (in 2000):

> one way to look at *adaptation* is to see it as a matter of a source novel's hypotext being transformed by a complex series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization. The source novel, in this sense, can be seen as a situated utterance produced in one medium and in one historical context, then transformed into another equally situated utterance that is produced in a different context and in a different medium. The source text forms a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues that the adapting film text can then take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform. The film adaptation of a novel performs these transformations according to the protocols of a distinct medium, absorbing and altering the genres and intertexts available thorough the grids of ambient discourses and ideologies, and as mediated by a series of filters: studio style, ideological fashion, political constraints, auteurist predilections, charismatic stars, economic advantage or disadvantage, and evolving technology [...]. (Stam 2000: 68-69; emphasis added)

Why such a variety of positions and attitudes? Because, as is the case in so many things, it turns out that there is a long story behind the concept "adaptation."

I will have to begin by reviewing at least a part of it. It all began many centuries ago with the notion of *imitatio*.

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[3] "L'on suit l'histoire pas à pas [...] [L]e film peut être tout autre chose qu'un simple album d'images s'il n'est toutefois rien de plus qu'un véhicule." (Mitry 1963: 348)

Part One

"Adaptation" and Its Discontents: Impoverishment

In the Beginning Was *Imitatio*

For the longest time, humanity (or rather, the small fraction of it that could afford taking the trouble to read and write) lived quite at ease with the idea that philosophers, writers and, in general, "poets" (i.e., literally, "creators") from the past had something useful to teach, to show, to tell them. That "something," it was then assumed, would be beneficial for the artists of the present to take into account as a pre-existing model, if only to deviate from it, at times unwittingly and at times less so, in a new context. That "something," it was then assumed, was precisely what would allow creators living in the present — often called, or perceived to be, "the Moderns" —, to mature their own *author*-ity in creative dialogism with the *author*-ity enjoyed by creators who had lived in the past — often called, or perceived to be, "the Ancients."

Thus it was that before, let us say, 1895 (I will rationalize later my choice for this symbolic date), for many happy centuries literate humanity smoothly coexisted with the notion of *imitatio*: Virgil imitated Homer; then Dante imitated Virgil, calling him "sweet pedagogue" (*Purg*. XII: 3) and "sweetest father" (*Purg*. XXX: 50) into the bargain. Medieval authors imitated each other, and their sources "in the books," without the slightest compunction. (For at least one adamantly candid reference to "the books," see the prologue to Hartmann von Aue's *Poor Heinrich — Der arme Heinrich*, ca. 1195).[4] On

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[4] "1 A knight was learned enough / 2 that he could read in books / 3 whatever he found written in them; / 4 he was called Hartman, / 5 he was a commissioner in Aue [Ouwe]. / 6 He gave many a look / 7 at all sorts of various books, / 8 and he began to wonder / 9 whether he couldn't come up with any such, / 10 in order that he could make / 11 a dreary hour lighter; / 12 something of such a nature / 13 as to promote God's glory, / 14 and for himself to obtain / 15 the benevolence of people. / 16 Now he is setting out to convey for you

occasion, this preference for "re-creative creativity" could reach the point of berating others for not being *faithful enough* to their sources, i.e., for not offering readers "the real thing." For an extreme, and extremely instructive, example, see *Tristan* (*circa* 1210), where Gottfried von Strassburg attacked Wolfram von Eschenbach for murdering his story in *Parzival* (1200 to 1210), behaving as a *vindaere wilder maere*, / *der maere wildenaere* (vv. 4,665-4,666),[5] "an inventor of wild stories, / a savage of storytelling."

Even the Romantics, supposedly the very embodiment of creative "originality," while considering themselves extremely original *as individuals*, in practice proved passionate plunderers of pre-existing literary traditions, and, with *wildly* differing levels of honesty about it, had no qualms in appropriating them in every possible way, shape and form. As readers we all have, I suppose, our favorite examples of such cases from various European literatures.[6]

My last, brief reference on this subject will be, just for the sake of even-handedness, to a poet who detested the Romantics, and was heartily reciprocated for his efforts: Goethe. Even leaving *Faust* aside (but we definitely ought to read, or re-read, at least vv. 682-85 about the inheritance — scientific instruments, books etc. — we receive from our forebears: "What from your fathers you received as heir, / Acquire

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[*diuten*, "to interpret" or possibly "to translate"] / 17 a story that he found written there." My translation.

"1 Ein ritter sô gelêret was / 2 daz er an den buochen las / 3 swaz er dar an geschriben vant: / 4 der was Hartman genant, / 5 dienstman was er zOuwe. / 6 er nam in manige schouwe / 7 an mislîchen buochen; / 8 dar an begund[e] er suochen / 9 ob er iht des vunde / 10 dâ mit[e] er swaere stunde / 11 möhte senfter machen, / 12 und von sô gewanten sachen / 13 daz gotes êren töhte / 14 und dâ mit[e] er sich möhte / 15 gelieben den liuten. / 16 nu beginnet er iu diuten / 17 ein rede die er geschriben vant. Vv. 1-17 of Heinrich von Aue 1966: 1.

[5] I am following Bert Nagel's "classic" analysis in Nagel 1977: 121 (the entire passage is discussed: 115-23). A slightly different numbering (4,663-4,664) and spelling (wildeRaere), with similar semantic implications, are put forward in Gottfried von Strassburg 1969: 70.

[6] Romanticism is often credited (or debited) with the invention and introduction of the "originality" requirement, but in my opinion this is not a correct view; things are a lot more complex. Unfortunately, illustrating and proving this particular point would require an entirely separate scholarly voyage — a voyage that would need to start with Hamann, Herder, the Grimms, Arnim, Brentano, Heine, Hugo, Nerval …

if you would possess it," etc. etc.),[7] here is one Goethean reflection which I think it would really hurt us to forfeit:

> The most original authors of modern times are original not because they produce something new, but only because they are capable of saying [old] things in such a way as though they had never before been said. (Goethe 1958: 636)[8]

I have only addressed some variants within the literature-on-literature type of *imitatio* from earlier centuries, but the general terms of the debate would not change by extending its purview to other art forms as well. Traditionally, from Botticelli's Renaissance cycle of paintings on the birth of Venus and the arrival of springtime (inspired by Neo-platonic philosophy) to Carmen's Romantic mutations from literature (Mérimée) to opera (Bizet) and then on to philosophy (Nietzsche) or back to literature again (Blok), via Swedenborg's impact on Balzac, or Beethoven's on Tolstoy, pretty much all types of cross-generation were undertaken at one point or another, and accepted as a recurrent fact of life in the realm of *imitative* inter-media re-creation.

To the best of my knowledge the most general, and generally applicable, pre-modern statement on *imitatio*, both within a single art form and across art boundaries, stems from Petrarch's erudite pen:

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[7] "What from your fathers you received as heir, /Acquire if you would possess it. / What is not used is but a load to bear; / But if today creates it, we can use and bless it." Goethe 1961: 114-15. "Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, / Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen! / Was man nicht nützt, ist eine schwere Last; / Nur was der Augenblick erschafft, das kann er nützen." *Faust I*, vv. 682-85.

[8] "Die originalsten Autoren der neusten Zeit sind es nicht deswegen, weil sie etwas Neues hervorbringen, sondern allein, weil sie fähig sind, dergleichen [alte] Dinge zu sagen, als wenn sie vorher niemals wären gesagt worden" (Goethe 1991: 860). The two maxims immediately before and after the one quoted deal in a similar manner with the same subject.

The imitator must strive to be *similar*, not to be *identical*; and the similarity must not be the one that the copy has with whatever it copies, which is the better the more similar it is, but like the one that the son has to the father.

Although these two are often greatly different, nevertheless a certain shade and what our painters call "air," which can most easily be detected in the visage and in the eyes, create a similarity such that when we see the son we immediately recall the father, although if you measure it exactly, everything proves different; but there is a hidden *je-ne-sais-quoi* (*est ibi nescio quid occultum*) that has just this effect.

[In imitating] we ought to proceed likewise, in such a way that, although something will be similar, much should be dissimilar. And that similarity should be hidden, so that the similarity may not be seized without the mind silently researching it — and it be intuited rather than spelled out.

We should thus avail ourselves of other people's ideas (*ingenio*) and their colors (*coloribus*), not of their words (*verbis*). That similarity is elusive, this one sticks out; that one defines the poet, this one defines the monkey.

We must, in sum, stand by Seneca's opinion, which before him had already been Horatius's. That is to say, we ought to write *as bees make honey: not by preserving the flowers, but by converting them into honeycombs*. In this way many various elements will become one; and this one will be something else, and better. (Petrarca 1977: 210-13)[9]

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[9] Translation mine from the Latin original and the Italian version. Emphasis mine.

"Curandum imitatori, ut quod scribit simile, non idem sit, eamque similitudinem talem esse oportere, non qualis est imaginis ad eum cuius imago est, quae quo similior eo maior laus artificis, sed qualis filii ad patrem. — In quibus cum magna saepe diversitas sit membrorum, umbra quaedam et quem pictores nostri aerem vocant, qui in vultu inque oculis maxime cernitur, similitudinem illam facit, que statim viso filio, patris in memoriam nos reducat, cum tamen si res ad mensuram redeat, omnia sint diversa; sed est ibi nescio quid occultum quod hanc habeat vim. — Sic et nobis providendum, ut cum simile aliquid sit, multa sint dissimilia, et id ipsum simile lateat ne deprehendi possit nisi tacita mentis indagine, ut intelligi simile queat potiusquam dici. — Utendum igitur ingenio alieno utendumque coloribus, abstinendum verbis; illa enim similitudo latet, haec eminet; illa poetas

These words by Petrarch (from the *Familiares*), which I am quoting in some detail because they are destined to find a remarkable and unexpected echo in Èizenshtein, represent the *summa summarum* of what was considered to be a self-evident truth until fairly recently. That is, until …

Unhappy Consciousness
One Century After Hegel: *Separatism*

… until, at the end of the nineteenth century — may I suggest 1895 as a symbolic, though clearly conventional date for reasons obvious to anyone working in, or anywhere near, the area of film studies — a dramatic epistemic discontinuity occurred in Western civilization. Science, the philosophy of science, philosophy in general literature, painting, sculpture, music … all were subverted from the bottom up in the major shift by which the twentieth century shunted its predecessors aside; and men (*men*: males, specifically) who could fly on sputtering canvas airplanes suddenly felt entitled to look down upon the generations of their ancestors who had not been so blessed. Cinema was added to the existing arts, though only tentatively at first. The avant-gardes — Dadaism, Cubism … — swept the board. The Russian-born movement soon described as "Formalism" endeavored to bring a scientific method even to that most impressionistic of sciences, the study of literature. And Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto loudly blared out its hatred against peace, museums, horse-drawn carts, women, and other obsolete things of the past.

As, in the new context, the concept of *originality* became the very touchstone of intellectual achievement, no longer could, say, a new *Aeneid* endeavour to imitate — on its own terms, of course — the *Odyssey*, or a new *Divine Comedy* pretend to shun away ("*Io non Enea, io*

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facit, haec simias. — Standum denique Senece [Ep. ad Lucil., 84, 3-10] 210 // 212 consilio, quod ante Senecam Flacci erat [Orazio Carm., IV, 2, 27-32], ut scribamus scilicet *sicut apes mellificant, non servatis floribus sed in favos versis*, ut ex multis et variis unum fiat, idque aliud et meius." — *Gratias* to Daniela Boccassini for this piece of Petrarchism.

non Paolo sono …") from the striving to re-write the *Aeneid*'s voyage through the Nether World.

By such vicissitudes did, in the matter of the century-old practice of intra-media and inter-media *re-creation*, the earlier habit of insouciance that for as many centuries had produced the general, and generally admitted, practice of *imitatio* suddenly give way to a culture of paranoia: a culture, that is, of suspicious *separatism*.

To the early twentieth-century avant-gardes and to the Futurists, from Marinetti to Maiakovskii, sullying one's hands with remnants from the past was the lowest abomination to which a human being could stoop.[10] Likewise, to the new "scientists of literature," the Formalists, there was no way of accepting the notion of effective transferability between diverse art forms that clearly did not share a common code. In a word, in the first quarter of the twentieth century the world of culture was shaken by a set of "local" as well as "general" revolutions no less momentous than those concurrently rocking the political arena; and this, it could be mischievously suggested, in competitive imitation thereof … or, indeed, *in lieu* thereof, as Pier Paolo Pasolini, ever the committed revolutionist, resentfully argued.[11] (Marinetti, for example, supported Fascism to the bitter end. And then again, let us not forget Mussolini's rhetorical insistence on the "revolutionary" nature of his regime).

It is in this cultural environment that we need to assess the early stages of the scholarly argument about the literature-and-cinema relationship. Cinema, the youngest Muse, was in its early years heavily dependent on her elder sisters — literature in particular — to acquire a cachet of respectability that, for social, historical and technological

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[10] Among the very few cases of *serious* twentieth-century *imitatio* — aside from Joyce's *Ulysses* — we must count Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, *Lotte in Weimar*, and above all *Doktor Faustus*, all discussed with sagacity in Genette 1982, *passim*. That said, it is of course no coincidence if *the renovation of (serious) twentieth-century art* was precisely *the* impossible task to accomplish which in *Doktor Faustus* Adrian Leverkühn believed himself to have contracted a pact with none other than the devil …

[11] Resentfully although, here, not necessarily accurately. — For the classic Pasolinian opposition between the two terms "[inter-class] revolution" and "[intra-bourgeois] civil war," see "Il PCI ai giovani!!," in his *Empirismo eretico* (Pasolini 1991: 151-59).

circumstances, it objectively could not yet afford on its own. While such dependence has now been, in successive stages, fully overcome, one can understand why in the first quarter of the twentieth century a trend toward what could be called a "separatist" reaction might have attracted some as appropriate. It even appears logical that the intensity of the overcompensatory impulse should have been proportional to the perceived undesirability of that initial dependent status.

We have already examined a typical early anti-adaptation argument: the "trombone snub" put forward by Viktor Shklovsky in 1923. Now, given that the Kazan cathedral is, as its name implies, a cathedral, it is obvious that in these stark terms Shklovsky's objection to any transposability between such heterogeneous art forms seems indeed strong. But let us pause for a moment and consider the following: what Shklovsky is referring to, and denying the possibility of, is a process of reproduction of *identical* meanings (significations). Perhaps unwittingly, Shklovsky calls the cat a cat when he bluntly mentions the inability of the process of literature-to-film "adaptation" to "*replace* words with a grey-black shadow blinking on a screen" and the impossibility for a novel to "*transfer* onto the screen" anything but a naked plot.[12]

If these are the standards which cinematic re-creation of works of literature is expected to uphold, then there is no doubt that the Kazanskii Sobor in St. Petersburg will always carry the day over its verbal or trombonesque rivals. Yet, that the identical cannot be reproduced by any means other than the original clearly strikes as a tautology. What film theorist can seriously expect cinema to participate in such contests — indeed, who can even enter it into them with a straight face? It is odd to witness the attempt by Shklovsky to sign up the subject of his own trade into a competition which cinema cannot but lose. First seeking an impossible challenge, and then sporting the prize of one's defeat: what a strange course of action to choose.[13]

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[12] In the original: "*Заменить* слова мельканьем серо–черной тени на экране (…) В романе почти ничего не может *перейти* на экран. Почти ничего кроме голого сюжэта" (Shklovskii 1923: 21, 23; in Italian: Shklovskii 1987: 115, 117; emphasis added).

[13] For fuller details on Shklovskii, see Testa 2001.

It took about thirty years for the legacy of the Russian Formalists to reach France. When this eventually happened, the *Hexagone* punctually went through what could be called Avatar Two in the state of denial I just described about the ongoing Film-and-Literature affair. At the time — the late 40s, the first half of the 50s — the self-styled, obviously very self-important *Cinéma de qualité* was producing a pretty conventional repertoire, offering the French public well-made but, all told, predictable screen versions of the classics of French nineteenth-century literature; and this, mostly as an escapist ploy to look away from the burning issue of the age, the colonial wars in Vietnam and then in Algeria.[14] In that context, the term "adaptation" was quickly canonized as *the* official derogatory bogeything by a wave of younger practitioners of Film Theory — most notably by Jean Mitry.

In *Esthétique et psychologie du cinema* (1963-65), Jean Mitry took issue with "adaptation" to pronounce it no less than an utter impossibility. The idea recurs in his book just mentioned no fewer than three times (adapted to two in the English translation):

> [A]daptations of the great works of fiction […] never in fact happened, for the simple reason that it is *just not possible*. (Mitry 1997: 326; emphasis added)[15]

Furthermore,

> if he chooses to express the same thing as the novelist, the adapter is bound to betray the form of the novel; and if his intention is to respect the form, then he is forced merely to put into pictures a world which is already signified, instead of

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[14] For perhaps the most effective contextualization of the circumstances surrounding the cinema of the French Fourth Republic (1945-1958), see Prédal 1991: 78-81.

[15] "[E]xaminant ici le strict problème de l'adaptation, nous allons voir qu'il n'en fut rien parce que la chose est impossible." (Mitry 1963: 1: 346)

creating his own significations. Direct transposition is *an impossibility*. (Mitry 1997: 331; emphasis added)[16]

Mitry's logic aims at splitting the vast cinematic realm into two parts: first, the celestial sphere of *good* "adapted" films — which, according to him, are possible, but have undergone such a thorough process of refinement and transposition that they have become something altogether new and different, thus no longer qualifying as *real* "adaptations"; second, the dark hell of commercial speculation, where — as we saw at the outset of this essay — the original piece of literature is "never more than a vehicle."

What Mitry calls "adaptation" is both *impossible* — because of the obvious structural differences between literature and cinema as distinct media — and *bad / stupid* (he does not seem to see a logical contradiction between such categories). The following is a typical example of Mitry's extremist separatism:

It is practically speaking impossible to express in words what Leonardo da Vinci expresses with form and color in *The Virgin of the Rocks*. [...] At a stretch, it is even possible to capture in words the significations which it constructs — but not to signify *the same thing*, to create identical significations, achieve with a verbal expression the "latent content" making it what it is. (Mitry 1997: 327; emphasis in the original)[17]

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[16] "Choisissant d'exprimer la même chose que le romancier, l'adaptateur trahira nécessairement la forme romanesque; et s'il entend la respecter il devra se contenter de mettre en images un monde signifié au lieu de *créer ses propres significations*. Le transfert est impossible." (Mitry 1963: 1: 352; emphasis in the original, not retained in the English translation).

[17] "Il est pratiquement impossible, par exemple, d'exprimer avec des mots ce que Léonard exprime avec des formes et des couleurs dans *La Vierge aux rochers*. [...] À la limite, on peut cerner avec des mots les significations qui sont propres [à ce tableau], mais on ne pourra jamais signifier *la même chose*, créer des significations identiques, obtenir par quelque expression verbale le "contenu latent" qui le caractérise." (Mitry 1963: 1: 347; emphasis in the original)

True enough — but so biased as to become irrelevant. It is not too difficult to flunk cinematic "adaptation" by putting it to a suitably impregnable test. Yet other options are possible. For example, few of us would be likely to question the notion that Leonardo successfully "adapted" the Gospel's narrative about Jesus's Last Supper with his *Ultima cena* in Milan's church of Santa Maria delle Grazie.[18] And besides, who would *want* two distinct works of art to say "the same thing"? (I will have to return to this point later).

Starting with the Sixties and Seventies, the ideas of Mitry and like-minded French *nouvelle vague* critics became established in North America. At this point, a third full-fledged reincarnation of the separatist paradigm took hold in the New World — a reincarnation eventually attested to by the complete translation into English, in 1997, of Mitry's *Esthétique et psychologie du cinema* from which I have been quoting. As a consequence, this fact established for good the term *adaptation* in North America, duplicating, some eighty years after the fact, Shklovskii's initial, dogmatic parting of the waters. Hence what could be called the now prevailing standard theory and practice of "adaptation."[19]

In the latest twist to an already very twisted story, some well-meaning but possibly too optimistic scholars of high Culture with a capital C (Naremore, Stam, the latter of whom we have already perused early in this essay, not without benefit) have recently begun to attempt rejuvenating the obviously wrinkled old term; in the circumstances, however, it seems legitimate to suspect that they might be trying to rescue a bad idea by throwing an overabundance of good ones after it.

At the opposite extreme, some other theorists (Hutcheon) have embraced with sincere gusto that term «as is»[20] — but in so doing have

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[18] For more details (and fuller quotes) on Mitry's argument, see Testa 2001.

[19] Possible examples: Cartmell and Whelehan 1999; Griffith 1997; Jenkins 1997; McFarlane 1996; Orr and Nicholson 1992 … — Some of these works even go as far as taking seriously the (in)famous concept of "fidelity"; on this, a little more (not much more, which the subject would not deserve) in a moment.

[20] See the admirably knowledgeable Hutcheon 2006.

opted to annex it mostly to the area of cultural studies with a small-case c. Hutcheon loves adaptation, a preference which is in itself no bad thing; except that she might, just possibly, love the wrong concept for the wrong reason. Thus, to make matters even less satisfactory, the word "adaptation" circulates today with different, competing nuances attached to it.

For the record, before we move on to more productive paradigms it might be useful if we at least briefly alllude to one rather ominous unintended, but possible, consequence of the obsession with the concept of "adaptation." I am alluding to the sadly tragicomic F-word "Fidelity" — a word which, falling prey to a true Mallarmean "demon of the analogy" (a concept drawn by his genial *petit poème en prose* by the same title), mixes and confuses two different realms of human experience: one, inter-media transposition / transposability, and the other, inter-spousal patterns of behavior. It seems surprising that such an inadequate, in fact misleading, concept has not been laughed out of our libraries a long time ago.

Part Two
Èizenshtein

From "Adaptation" to "Re-creation"

While the West was focusing on embalming Shklovskii's Futurist / Formalist calembours into a mummy more sacred, and more enduring, than Lenin's, in Shklovskii's home country film theory took on new life; and it took on new life in the person, and thanks to the efforts of, Sergei Èizenshtein, whose usage of the more fruitful term *re-creation* I shall now consider.

Èizenshtein explicitly mentions *re-creation*, extolling it as "magnificent," and contrasting it to the repulsiveness of *forgery*, in his

essay "Diderot Wrote About Cinema."[21] The point of that essay is to oppose to each other uncreative, debased imitation of pre-existing forms with an original appropriation of them that incorporates features inspired by a changed environment and adequate to it. For the first he uses the term *poddelka* ("forgery"), for the second *vossozdanie* ("re-creation"), which he contrasts sharply against each other.[22]

The all-important notion that Èizenshtein develops on the subject is that of appropriation or assimilation (*osvoenie*) as conducive to, indeed identical with, cinematic re-creation. As is typical of Èizenshtein, this occurs fairly unsystematically. (Keeping Stalin at bay was but one of the many concerns that prevented him from meeting the exacting scholarly standards of our academia). I am alluding to an essay, the Spanish-titled *Torito*, deeply influenced by Èizenshtein's travel and work in Mexico — a country also home to a recent successful revolution at the time of the director's writing.[23]

In *Torito*, Èizenshtein again sets up the polar opposition between *forgery* and *re-creation* I just cited. There are, Èizenshtein writes, two mutually exclusive paths that can be trodden by directors bringing literature into cinema. The first is mise-en-forme (*oformlenie*) — which, by analogy with today's term "word-processing" (Fr. *mise en page*), I suggest could alternatively be called *form-processing*.[24] This, Èizenshtein argues, is good; it does lead to appropriation / assimilation, and thus to the re-creation he elsewhere calls "magnificent." The second one boils

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[21] Having been unable to locate either the original or an English version of Èizenshtein's article, I am quoting from the Italian translation: "La contraffazione (*poddelka*) è ripugnante. La ri-costruzione (*vossozdanie*) è magnifica." ["*Forgery* (poddelka) *is repulsive. Re-creation* (vossozdanie) *is magnificent*"] (Eizenstejn 1993: 385). *Ibidem* bibliographical information on the original (posthumous) edition. (*Ri-costruzione*, "re-construction," is in fact an incorrect Italian translation).

[22] For a closer discussion of the two terms *supra*, and re-creation *infra*, see the Introduction to Testa 2002b.

[23] No, Èizenshtein was not in Mexico looking for Trotskii — he got there in late 1930, whereas Trotskii only did so in the late 1930s. No potential detective novel there.

[24] Depending on the context, the technical meaning of Russ. *oformlenie* ranges from "mise-en-scène" to "typesetting."

down to mere external imitation. (A "simian" imitation, Petrarch would say).

After some elaboration on the history of Soviet cinema, and an allusion to failed attempts by Soviet directors to *imitate passively certain external features* of American cinema, Èizenshtein provides a fitting parallel to illustrate his pedagogical point:

> As an image of the borrowing (*zaimstvovanie*) of a principle […] I would like you to keep in mind the airplane. […] The true victory of human beings against air undoubtedly began at the time when they moved from the imitation of the external form of the airplane's flying prototypes — the birds — to the acknowledgement of *form as a phenomenon-structuring law* (*forma kak zakon stroeniia iavlenii*).
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> In other words, human beings' attempts to fly were doomed to failure for as long as the most important thing seemed to them to be the imitation of the external shape of birds' flight. […]
>
> [This image (*obraz*)] will help you remember that the elements you "borrow" will become part and parcel of your own invention, in a vital manner, only when they will be not fragments haphazardly drawn from another particular case, but rather, the result of the mature acquisition of a principle, appropriately applied in different or analogous circumstances.[25]

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[25] My translation. Yes, Èizenshtein's *Selected Works* in English include selections from *Torito* — but this theoretical part is dropped and only the autobio component is retained. A generally accurate full version in Italian appears in Eizenstejn 1993: 330, 332.

"Пусть напоминанием о заимствовании принципа … останется в вашей памяти аэроплан … Настоящая победа человека над воздухом, несомненно, началась с того момента, когда от подражания внешней форме летающих прообразов аэроплана — птиц — он перешел к осознанию *формы как закона строения явлений*.

Другими словами, попытки человека взлететь были обречены на неудачу до тех пор, пока на первом месте у него оставалось внешнее подражание полету птиц (…)

(Образ этот) поможет вам запомнить, что "заимствованные" элементы будут *живительно входить в состав вашего изобретения лишь тогда, когда они будут не случайными фрагментами другого частного случая, а результатом мудрого освоения принципа, уместно примененного в других или аналогичных условиях.*" (Èizenshtein 1966: 649, 650; emphasis added)

In a nutshell: as a governing principle, *direct imitation* is out; on the other hand, the *intelligent reproduction of equivalent functions* is in. To put the issue in Èizenshtein's more general terms, we should look at form "as a phenomenon-structuring law."

Èizenshtein's eloquent argument should satisfactorily account for the reasons why I am adamant that we discard altogether the word "adaptation" and consistently replace it with *re-creation*. As a sole corollary I would add that, when concepts and practices previously shaped by a given cultural-historical mold are re-created in a different medium and in a different century, they are also to be re-cast into another mold appropriate to a socially, technologically and ideologically altogether different moment.

Despite Èizenshtein's well-deserved fame in Anglophone countries, this particular contribution of his never took hold there, and instead, "adaptation" carried the day — indeed, not just the day but the entire last third of the twentieth century. Only very recently, by way of the growing influence of Bakhtinian dialogism on Anglophone scholars, have concepts such as "transcoding" and "transcultural adaptation" begun to take hold among them. But, however diminished, battered and wounded, the term *adaptation* still lives on, and continues to influence mental processes and attitudes in the English-speaking world.

From the philosophical viewpoint, the problem with "adaptation" is that the term contains an in-built ontological prejudice, postulating that each cultural *arte*-fact A is an accomplished, exhaustive, self-contained entity located in a particular spot of the spatio-temporal continuum. Thus, the recurrence of some similar impulses (ideas, techniques … whether or not materialized and objectified in the fictions we call "character" and "plot") in another entity located in a different spot of the spatio-temporal continuum will — within the parameters of the "adaptation" concept — automatically be assumed to eke out a derivative, secondary existence as A'.

In contrast, re-creation — as its name attempts to suggest — puts every artefact on an ontological foot of equality. In the universe of re-creation, I would argue, there is no A > A' transfer process, where A

and A′ would be separated by a historical and/or inter-media watershed. On this view, given an experience ε, there are merely *different artistic expressions* of that ε which approximate such experience by *manifesting themselves* as, say, artefacts M and N (or M, N, … , Z). The poietic barrier does *not* separate M from N; it rises instead between ε, on the one hand, and M and N (or N, … , Z) on the other. *All* representations, M through Z, are *on the same side* of the barrier.

Thomas Mann's and Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice*, one of the most underestimated inter-media affairs to have taken place since literature and cinema began to interact, can offer us a pertinent practical example of these processes. Aschenbach's Venetian story is only apparently about Polish boys and Italian cholera; rather, it is about the "forces of the abyss" synthesized by the Eleusinian mysteries and exorcised by Mann's self-controlled rhythmical prose in *Der Tod in Venedig* — and then evoked again by Mahler's music in Visconti's *Morte a Venezia*. Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* uses the conventions proper to a millennial literary tradition, steeped in forms made familiar to us by ancient Greece; but these, too, are in turn *mere epiphenomenal conventions*, intended to approximate the ἀπείϱων, the Infinite.

If I were a film director, in these circumstances I would feel that seeking one-on-one equivalents for words of literature would be the least of my concerns. I would feel, indeed, that this pseudo-problem would distract me from the one true problem at hand: how to establish contact with the dark world to express which images *and* words are equally inadequate.

In other words: Mann's quasi-hexameters are themselves "re-creations" of something inexpressible, something that radically defies representation: desire in its pure, uncontrollable state. Thus, *pace* literal-minded philologists bent on endowing literature with an ontological (as opposed to merely chronological) priority it does not have, re-created cinema is not there/here to "adapt" a pre-existing literary text already perfectly accomplished in all its levels of expressiveness. At the same time, *pace* concerned theorists who in querying the small fry of "adaptation" omit to question (i.e., passively accept) the much larger ontological prejudice just mentioned, in this

sense at least literature and cinema are not on opposite sides of a watershed: they are *on the same one*.[26]

My readers might at this point fear that, having discarded the "adaptation" concept and *a fortiori* its corollary, the F-word "fidelity," I am now favoring a galaxy of indifferent re-creative alternatives: a model in which, so to speak, "M-to-Z, anything goes." In fact, nothing is more remote from my intentions, as I shall explain in a moment.

Part Three
Re-creation: from Impoverishment to Enrichment

Complexity Theorized

A one-dimensional, teleological conceptual frame such as the one imposed by "ad-*apt*-ation" encourages us to think in terms of univocal hierarchies: for every given range of transcodificatory options, A > X, only one X will prove the most "apt" (for example, X = A', but not A'' or A'''). "Re-creation," in contrast, encourages us to think in multi-dimensional terms, with different alternatives (M, N, … , Z) exploring different possibilities implied in ε, and thus avoiding all attempts to create a mechanical formula by which to "crank out" a fixed value for the unknown that we wish to determine.

Let us reason *e contrario* and assume that the re-creation of literature in cinema were an exact science, with operations characterized by a set of properties allowing for univocal equations of the type 2 x 2 = 4, in turn susceptible to undergo univocal reversibility as 4 : 2 = 2. This is just the situation which would satisfy Mitry's demand, cited above, that a film express exactly "the same thing" as the work of literature from which it was inspired. Would such a type of convertibility between texts be *desirable*? Probably no one ever rejected

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[26] For a close reading of the Mann-Visconti relation, see Chapter 8 of Testa 2002b.

this hypothesis more forcefully than the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, who protests that, as a human being endowed with free volition, he wishes to be able to claim that 2 x 2 = (for example) 5. For something as banal and mechanically reproducible as 2 x 2 = 4, he caustically argues, no human beings are needed — any machine can produce that result. Dostoevsky *contra* Mitry:

> What will have become of our wills, [gentlemen,] when everything is graphs and arithmetic, and nothing is valid but two [times] two make four? Two [times] two will make four without any will of mine! Is that what one's own will means? […]
>
> I agree that two [times] two make four is an excellent thing; but to give everything its due, two [times] two make five is also [at times] a very fine [little] thing. (Dostoyevsky 1972: 39, 41)[27]

We get here to the core if the re-creation issue, because anyway the cinematic re-creation of literature is nowhere near the neat simplicity of 2 x 2 = 4 and 4 : 2 = 2. The conversion between the literary system and that of cinema is characterized by a complexity of the highest level. In this case there simply cannot be any question of creating an algorithm that establishes the biunivocal equivalences necessary for us to move from Text A to A' and then back from A' to the original reading in A.

To clarify this point as needed, let us develop certain implications in the theory of the Soviet semiotician Iurii M. Lotman:

> If we compare the language of cinematographic narration with verbal narrative structures, we find a deep difference in their respective basic principles of organization, which completely rules out the possibility of a univocal translation. […]

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[27] "Эх, господа, какая уж тут своя воля будет, когда дело доходит до таблички и до арифметики, когда будет одно только *дважды два четыре* в ходу? *Дважди два* и без моей воли четыре будет. Такая ли своя воля бывает! (1: 8) (...) — Я согласен, что *дважды два четыре* – превосходная вещь; но если уже всё хвалить, то и *дважды два пять* – премилая иногда вещица (1: 9)." (Dostoevskii 1973: 117, 119)

It is obvious that, if we proceed to carry out a reverse translation, we will *in no case* obtain the text from which we had started out. We can describe this as the birth of *new* texts. The mechanism of translation based on conventional equivalence thus serves the purpose of creating new texts, that is to say, acts as *a mechanism of creative thought*.[28]

The emphasis is here on the term *creative*: creation occurs precisely *in the differential space* that is not covered by "perfect" (i.e., perfectly reversible, perfectly and mechanically predictable) translatability. The link to the Man from Underground's "2 x 2 does *not* equal 4" argument echoes in Lotman with perfect clarity: certain interpretive operations might well be *perfect* — but if any machine can carry them out, what kind of truth (or, *of information*) are they liable to reveal to us as human beings? None, evidently. It is not the single, ideal language of *sterile perfection* that human beings understand, but their many *creatively imperfect* humane ones: creative, *because* non-"perfect."

In terms of cinematic practice, on this view the task of film directors is *not* to aim for a target that is anyway going to elude them, but to act in such a way that the new equation they are setting up holds according to its own internal logic. In some sense, for masters of cinema who re-create works produced by masters of literature it is *necessary to ensure* that 2 x 2 = 5; or, more precisely, that 5 is the only

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[28] Translation mine.

"Сопоставляя язык киноповествования с нарративными словесными структурами, мы обнаруживаем глубокое различие в таких коренных принципах организации (…), которые полностью исключают возможность однозначного перевода (…)

Очевидно, что если мы осуществим обратный перевод, то *ни в одном случае* мы не получим исходного текста. В этом случае мы можем говорить о возникновении *новых* текстов. Таким образом, механизм неадекватного, условно–эквивалентного перевода служит созданию новых текстов, то есть является *механизмом творческого мышления*." (Lotman 1983: 101-02; emphasis in the original). I have bee unable to locate an English version of this essay; an Italian translation was collected in Lotman 1985 (quote on p. 121).

solution consistent with "2 x 2 =" as defined on the basis of the operations and properties of their own new, re-created universes.[29]

The best way for M, N, … , Z to re-create ε, then, is for each of them to find their own desired target value: 5, 3, or any other number (even 4, for that matter, if so desired) that establishes a self-consistent system. *To "follow" ε appropriately, in other words, each of its re-creations M, N, … , Z must take its own path.* In the matter of the literature-to-cinema transmutation, in other words, there can be no prescriptive golden rule: there are only empirical re-contextualizations as diverse as the new given contexts in which they arise.[30]

Yet this is, in a very real sense, only the first half of the issue. Because the re-creation principle puts on artistic artefacts the onus of more freedom than "adaptation" used to, its responsibility in endorsing as artistically desirable this or that particular specimen of inter-media transcodification becomes correspondingly greater. Hence the vital second half of the question: does re-creation retain any evaluative standard, any *critical* value (in the literal sense of the word) — or does it replace the absurd strictures of old with a nocturnal free-for-all in which all re-creations are grey?

To cover this question cogently, I would like to return to Lotman's semiotics and re-visit with him the argument that cultural systems, while similar to other systems of communication, are nonetheless set apart from the latter by the fact that they are characterized by higher levels of complexity, in fact *strive for the highest possible level* of complexity:

> [T]he transmission of information is not the only function of the communicative mechanism, or of the cultural one as a whole. Aside from carrying out these operations, indeed, both elaborate

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[29] A particularly synthetic, masterly criticism of the "2 x 2 = 4" (perfect convertibility) argument can be found in Lotman 1992: 12-16, esp. 13.

[30] From antiquity to Nietzsche's *The Joyful Wisdom*, and on to C. G. Jung's *Red Book*, maxims of the type «If you want to follow me, follow yourself first» have anyway enjoyed a long tradition.

new information, that is to say, they take up that same role which creative consciousness has for the thinking individual.[31]

Although seemingly paradoxical, it corresponds to the structure of the human mind that in a chain such as: 1), *message coded by road signs*; 2), *text in a natural language*; 3), *creation by poetic talent* it should be precisely the last text mentioned, which is the one endowed with the greatest cultural value, to be *least easily transmitted*. Hence Lotman's conclusion:

> [E]fforts aimed at adequate mutual comprehension [i.e., at what could be called an "algebraic convertibility" of texts] are but one of the two main tendencies in the communicative mechanism of culture. Alongside the striving to unify codes and to maximize the simplification of mutual understanding between A1 and A2, in the mechanism of culture exactly opposite tendencies are at work as well. […]
>
> Somehow it seems important to do whatever is necessary to do *not in the simplest way, but in the most complex one*.[32]

Luchino Visconti, who knew little about the new science of semiotics but is generally credited (in Italy at least) with having known quite a bit about cinema — *and* literature, *and* literature-and-cinema —

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[31] Translation mine.

"Передача сообщения — не единственная функция как коммуникативного, так и культурного механизма в целом. Наряду с этим они осуществуют выработку *новых* сообщений, то есть выступают в той же роли, что и творческое сознание мыслящего индивида." (Lotman 1983: 101; emphasis in the original; in Italian: 1985: 120-21).

[32] Translation mine.

"(У)силия по адекватности взаимопонимания составляют *лишь одну из двух главных тенденций* коммуникативного механизма культуры. Наряду со стремлением к унификации кодов и максимальному облегчению взаимопонимания между А1 и А2, в механизме культуры работают и прямо противоположные тенденции (...)

По каким–то причинам оказывается важным *делать то, что необходимо сделать, не самым простым, а наиболее сложным образом.*" (Lotman 1983: 98, 100; emphasis in the original; in Italian: 1985: 118, 119-20).

For more details on Lotman, see Testa 2001.

tersely argued as much when he described in a nutshell his own *ars poetica*.

Visconti's first concern is to reject as self-delusion the Futurist / avant-garde obsession with "originality":

> If I wrote a book, exactly as is the case when I make a film, I would be writing on the basis of all the input I have received from my readings and from my artistic predilections. And there is little doubt that what I would then say would already have been said by someone else. I would be at liberty not to indicate my sources. They would exist nonetheless.
>
> A man who had never read a book, never looked at a painting, never heard any music? His gaze, his sense of hearing absolutely virgin? And who would be using a camera to look at the world and translate it into images? Yes, that person could certainly practice "pure cinema." But … [there can be no such thing].[33]

Visconti then proceeds to identify *complexity* as the quality on which artistic creation is based, and not without a certain ambition declares:

> Whatever one does, one always builds upon a myth or a story that has more or less already been told. The only thing that matters is the new gaze cast on it. When I choose a specific literary work, it is so that I can give it a new dimension; or rather, a dimension which it already possesses implicitly, but which only "another" gaze is able to give it — precisely the gaze called for by the creator, a gaze that is creative in and of itself.

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[33] My translation.

"Si j'écrivais un livre, exactement [comme] lorsque je fais un film, j'écrirais avec tout ce que ma culture, mes prédilections artistiques m'auraient apporté. Et ce que je dirais, un autre, sans doute, l'aurait déjà dit. Je pourrais ne pas indiquer mes sources. Elles existeraient quand même. — Un homme qui n'aurait jamais lu, jamais regardé un tableau, entendu une musique? Le regard, l'oreille absolument vierges? Et qui se servirait d'une caméra pour voir le monde, le transcrire en images? Oui, celui-là sans doute pourrait faire du cinéma pur. Mais…" (Visconti 1984: 107)

> *My purpose is to strive for the most difficult reading among those that the author would have chosen, the secret meaning which he wished his most attentive readers to uncover.* It seems to me that doing this, too, means being an author.[34]

Neither Lotman nor Visconti make an additional point, which follows logically from the above and in my view has the greatest practical implications: it is *vital* that transcodifications aim for maximum complexity in their target system (say system Z, in the terms I have been using) because *it is certain* that, during the process of inter-media re-creation from (say) system M, vast amounts of information will be lost in the first place. If the information lost is not replaced by new information *apt* to function in the new system, then Z will inevitably be a lot poorer … a lot more *inept* than M.

With this last comment, have we now in some way gone full circle and ended up returning, after a long circuit, to Mitry's old intolerance against trans-codification? I hope it is clear that this is in no way my desire. What follows aims at spelling out just how.

Complexity Tested

My starting point for the conclusion of my theoretical argument, while not altogether incompatible with Mitry's well-known position on "adaptation," happens to be more sophisticated. I am alluding to the splendidly *separatist* peroration by Federico Fellini by which I have

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[34] My translation.

"Quoi que l'on fasse, on s'appuie toujours sur un mythe ou une histoire plus ou moins déjà racontée. Qu'importe, sinon le nouveau regard? Mais quand je choisis une œuvre littéraire précise, c'est pour lui donner une nouvelle dimension, ou plutôt une dimension qu'elle possède implicitement, mais que seul un regard "autre" peut lui donner. Ce regard que réclame justement le créateur et qui, lui-même, est créateur. — *Mon ambition est d'aller dans le sens le plus difficile qu'aurait choisi l'auteur, le sens secret qu'il souhaitait être décelé par ses lecteurs les plus attentifs*. Il me semble que cela aussi est faire œuvre d'auteur." (*Ibid*.: 107-108; emphasis added)

opened this essay. It deserves to be now completed and honored by a fuller quote and a fuller reflection:

> A work of art is its own unique expression. [Some] transpositions from one art to the other I find monstrous, ridiculous, off the mark. My preferences are for original subjects written for the cinema. I believe cinema doesn't need literature, it needs only film writers, that is, people who express themselves according to the rhythms and the cadences intrinsic to film. Film is an autonomous art form which has no need of transpositions to a level which, in the best of cases, will always and forever be mere illustration. Each work of art thrives in the dimension which conceived it and through which it is expressed. *What can one get from a book? Plot. But plot itself has no significance.* It is the feeling which is expressed that matters, the imagination, atmosphere, illumination, in sum, the interpretation. Literary interpretation of events has nothing to do with cinematic interpretation of those same events. They are two completely different methods of expression. (Fellini 1988: 28; emphasis added)[35]

But, in light of the re-creation theory I am proposing here, on closer inspection the director only proves half right. The charge of semiotic *impoverishment* ("Plot." In the original: "Delle situazioni.") to which FeFe alludes is indeed real *when the re-creation at hand is an impoverishing, i.e., an incompetent one*. However, that same charge cannot be made to stick when a filmmaker substitutes the complexity

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[35] "Un'opera d'arte nasce in una sua unica espressione; trovo mostruose, ridicole, ab-erranti [certe] trasposizioni. Le mie preferenze vanno in genere a soggetti originali scritti per il cinema. Io credo che il cinema non abbia bisogno di letteratura, ma ha bisogno soltanto di autori cinematografici, cioè di gente che si esprima attraverso i ritmi, le cadenze, che sono particolari del cinema. Il cinema è un'arte autonoma che non ha bisogno di trasposizioni su un piano che, nel migliore dei casi, sarà sempre e soltanto illustrativo. Ogni opera d'arte vive nella dimensione in cui è stata concepita e nella quale si è espressa. *Che cosa si prende da un libro? Delle situazioni. Ma le situazioni, di per sé, non hanno alcun significato.* E' il sentimento con cui queste vengono espresse che conta, la fantasia, l'atmosfera, la luce: in definitiva l'interpretazione di quei fatti. Ora l'interpretazione letteraria di quei fatti non ha nulla a che fare con l'interpretazione cinematografica di quegli stessi fatti. Sono due modi di esprimersi completamente diversi." (Fellini 1983: 23-24; emphasis added)

of one literary artistic system with a cinematic system of comparable, or even higher, artistic complexity.

An obvious example of a case of EQUIVALENT COMPLEXITY is — to stay with Fellini — the phantasmagoric re-creation of Kafka's *Amerika* (a.k.a. *The Man who Disappeared*) inside the Cinecittà kermesse carried out in his own *Intervista* (1987);[36] or — to return to Visconti — *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960), in which the director displays the genius of yoking Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Verga and Testori to the humble plight of immigrants and prostitutes interacting in Milan's melting pot.

GREATER COMPLEXITY (Mitry, where are you?) has, on the other hand, been achieved when certain films proved able to transform pre-existing one-dimensional literary works into vast "frescoes" functioning on *many more* different levels (historical, social, political, psychological …) than their respective "pre-texts" could ever hope to do. This was the well-known case of, for example, De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948, vs. Bartolini's), and Visconti's own *Senso* (1954, vs. Camillo Boito's). It was also the case, I would argue, for Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963, vs. Tomasi di Lampedusa's). Whereas Visconti's *Leopard* superposes individual, social and political tragedies, and a bit of comedy to boot, thus creating a multi-layered narrative structure of almost cosmic resonance, the sole concern of Tomasi's *Leopard* seems to lie with the fate of one aristocratic Sicilian family; and his narrative voice — the occasional allusion to Baudelaire notwithstanding — is almost exclusively interested in the cheap retrospective *jeu de massacre* of showing that most people in humanity's past were not as rational as they could and should have been for their own good. Nothing especially *original* here.

For my final point I will remain with Visconti so as to "control for the director's talent," to use the language of the social sciences — i.e., so as not to compare a racing horse to a jackass.

Finally: certain films do indeed offer us unsatisfactory re-creations from literature, if and when they replace their earlier counterpart's

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[36] For a detailed analysis of the Kafka-Fellini theme, see Chapter 2 of Testa 2002b.

complex, polysemic systems with systems of LESSER COMPLEXITY. This was the sad case when, in re-creating such an elusive, between-the-lines text as Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942), Visconti was contractually forced by Camus's widow to restrain himself, in making *Lo straniero* (1967), to the well-known suicidal formula "The plot, all the plot, and nothing but the plot." To use Camus's favorite term in a demeaned sense, this was an obviously *absurd* demand which promised disaster, and promptly delivered it both in critical terms and at the box office.[37]

Examples in each of these three categories could clearly be accumulated *ad lib*. But the argument best summarized as *complexification vs. simplification* is fruitful, I believe, because it allows us to inject a substantial amount of objectivity into the way we conceptualize the re-creation process previously known as "adaptation." Yes, there may be a continuum, as Hutcheon astutely postulates (Hutcheon 2006: 171-72), stretching, at one end, from the "maximum fidelity" — ouch! — of literary translation, to Lord-of-the-Rings Barbie dolls, which are located at the opposite one of "maximum infidelity." But, Lord of the Dolls aside, the point that it would be most important to make — and that Hutcheon does not make, or does not wish to make — is that *from a semiotic viewpoint* such a scale *must be conceived as reflecting a quality-indexed decreasing level of complexity*.

On the scale I am proposing (to quote and use here one of Hutcheon's best examples — see Hutcheon 2006: 177), "Shakespeare's adaptation of Arthur Brooke's versification of Matteo Bandello's adaptation of Luigi da Porto's version of Masuccio Salernitano's story of two very young, star-crossed Italian lovers from Verona" would stand on the highest rung, in the company of the works of Homer, Virgil and Dante, in the company — among others — of Fellini, Visconti, and a few more film directors; while, on that same scale, pieces such as Star Trek coffee mugs would receive a scantier attention, proportionate to the less exalted position earned them by the *smaller amount of semiotic information* they convey. This is because, in my opinion, there happens to be a substantial hiatus in value between a

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[37] For more details on *Lo Straniero*, see Testa 2002a: 54-56.

work of art that contains a certain amount, however defined, of *truth* and *beauty*, and a mass-produced object that contains, at most, a watery brewage.

In broaching *quantity* (of information), am I then also addressing, by proxy as it were, the issue of (artistic) *quality*? I certainly am. Monuments of culture — i.e., great works of art — can live forever on into the future (much to the Futurists' aggravation …) because of their un-repeatable *quality*.[38] Art perennially thrives in the space of Dostoevsky's "2 x 2 = 5"; its extra unit is the value added, *ex nihilo*, by Monna Lisa's "inexplicable" smile. On the other hand, cultural monuments of the caliber of Star Trek para-infernalia are most likely to disappear very quickly from an already tragically overburdened human recollection.

This is justly the case: the human mind's finite resources ought to be reserved for what truly commands humanity's enduring attention. Not all candidates for inter-media re-creation are liable to pass the demanding, but all-important test of historic memory.

Italian Coda
Today's Italian Cinema: Realism vs. Bad Mimesis in a *"Cinéma de (mauvaise) qualité"*

After seeking inspiration in so many great names in the history of the human intellect — after approaching general problems of such a considerable impact — I will at this point switch to considering some specifics about contemporary Italian cinema. It is my hope that, despite

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[38] We owe to Walter Benjamin's justly famous essay on the work of art (1936) the fundamental conceptual distinction between the twentieth-century *material reproducibility (Reproduzierbarkeit)* of the *exterior* of a work of art and the enduring *non-duplicability on command* of its essence (aura): *that* is art's "surplus," which brings it *grat*-uitously from "2 x 2" to 5. *Kunst* is indeed *Gunst*, *Gnade*: *grace* produces it, not reason — and technology least of all.

(Art = *a highly complex system* of a special, non-duplicable-on-command kind of information, worthy of enduring memory because of the ethico-aesthetic utility that — when properly trained to seeing — humanity can see in it).

its now more contingent anchorage, my argument will nevertheless retain some fraction of the general resonance which the vast issues at stake do evoke.

Quality is, by definition, impossible to assess directly; only quantity can be so measured. Yet a consensus clearly exists that Italian cinema lived through heady days of glory in the Cold War environment of the 40s-50s, the time of the *miracolo economico* in the 50s-60s, and the conflicts of the *cinema politico* of the 60s-70s. Those were the days of a cinema that, aside from producing hundreds of successful B-movies, was also strong on quality, producing great art cinema and blockbusters … *and* a large number of masterpieces that were both things at the same time. The critical consensus then goes on to say that in the 1980s Italian cinema went through a near-death experience, wrought on it by the barbaric-style invasion of private TV channels. Thereafter, the 1990s marked a resurrection of sorts, the age of the so-called Nuovo Cinema Italiano, with directors (quite aside from older masters returning) such as Archibugi, Nichetti, Benigni, Cristina and Francesca Comencini, Amelio, Tornatore, Moretti, Ricky Tognazzi, Marco Risi, Luchetti, Zaccaro, Giuseppe Ferrara, Calopresti, Soldini, Giordana, Placido, Chiesa, Rubini, … perhaps even Salvatores.

I do not wish to dispute the fact of that renewal; to me, it is real, and it is a cause for real rejoicing. But this rejoicing does not protect me — not completely — from the nagging doubt, at times visiting the most inward-looking convolutions of my mind, that rumors about Italian cinema's resurrection might be, relatively speaking, exaggerated. This rejoicing does not protect me — not completely, at any rate — from the suspicion that the Nuovo Cinema Italiano of the late 1990s-early 21st century has re-emerged from the crisis of the 1980s in a different and qualitatively (not to mention the inevitable, *quantitatively*) much diminished form: a form perhaps suited to today's financially more brutal environment … but a form diminished nonetheless.

It is my persuasion that, in the present general panorama of (relatively) small budgets, small audiences, small ambitions, and small issues — the narrow panorama of what could be called the "chamber cinema" of today's Italy — the few films that do stand out owe their

greater *quality* to the above-average, or even outstanding, *complexity* of their semiotic structure. Films such as, to cite but one established classic from the mid-90s, Amelio's *Lamerica* show a wonderfully intricate layering and mirroring of references, and such a diverse array of means to express them (in theme/argument, characters/psychology, acting, photography, *mise en scène*, soundtrack/music, screenplay …), that each time they are shown to diverse audiences across the world they invariably elicit a powerful emotional response.

But many, many others among today's Italian films somehow *don't*.

And, when such is the case, the reason why they don't is, I am inclined to think, that they are not sufficiently *complex*. In fact, I am inclined to think that, when such is the case, those *films-that-somehow-don't* are banal, predictable, *simplistic*. Their *auteurs* — to use an expression so cherished by Nanni Moretti that he reahearses it in every other one of his interviews — "have done their little homework" ("hanno fatto il loro compitino"), but nothing more than that. They lack in *inventio*: they have not scoured today's Italy for a gripping theme. And they lack in *dispositio*: they have not sought to "open up" that theme in such a way that its relevance would beam out to anyone observing it from across the oceans, across the Alps, or even just across the street. To anyone objecting that in today's Italy it is "impossible" to make films with universal appeal, I would like to reply: How do we know? Let us try. Let us try with something (apparently, deceptively) simple: a young person who cannot find a job, for example. Or an adult who loses it.

I could not tell which is the cause and which is the effect, but in today's largely asphyxiated — and asphyxiating — Italian cinema I notice a massive return of *genre films*: for example, the *cinema adolescenziale*; the *cinema tossico* (drug addicts' story); the yuppie-family-in-crisis genre; the "desperate divorcee" genre; the splatter; the American-style action film (heir to the Italian *poliziottesco*); the *noir* ("detective fiction, defective diction," as the tongue-twisting insinuation would have it) … And some of these films do not even have the alibi of a slim, suffocating production budget.

Among the films of the early (20)00s that most signally fail to say or show anything remotely unpredictable — i.e., not predicted by the viewer — one can certainly count products such as *Romanzo criminale* (*Cinema criminale*?), by Michele Placido; *Arrivederci amore ciao* (*Arrivederci cinema ciao*?), by Michele Soavi; and *Come Dio comanda* (*Come Berlusconi comanda*?), by Gabriele Salvatores. All three — curiously, all re-created (though, alas, not very creatively) from books of fiction — go to considerable lengths in reductively mixing variable amounts of *very elementary particles* of fiction, *cronaca nera*, drug-trafficking, idiocy of all stripes, violence, sex, and money … and then more of the same all over again.

Films like these can be said, by the way, to belong to what I suggest we call it the Italian *pornoir* flick: clearly a successful genre exploiting the enduring *rentabilité* (profitability) of humankind's residual pre-human genetic encoding.

Such (technically, *only* technically well-made, "quality") films use the generic closure "as a phenomenon-structuring law" — to *adapt*, tears in my eyes, Èizenshtein's prophetic words from *Torito* — and thereby secure for themselves a *generic success* that is the more guaranteed within its own microsphere, the more it is renounced in a broader and truly relevant, supra-temporal arena. In other words, these instant movies *say nothing, very well*. And to be absolutely certain that they achieve this worthy goal, many of them and particularly the (*por*)*noirs* go to considerable lengths in ensuring that they re-create books which, in turn, are very skillful at saying nothing.

It seems revealing that, as we conclude our exploration of the issue of the literature-to-cinema re-creation, the three books of fiction just mentioned should bring us back to the very issue of semiotic (and cultural) banality *vs.* complexity that has made up the core of our inquiry. *Arrivederci amore ciao*, by Massimo Carlotto; *Romanzo criminale*, by Giancarlo De Cataldo; and *Come Dio comanda*, by Niccolò Ammaniti … these books show themselves to be haunted by the very same poverty of systemic information that bedevils their respective cinematic byproducts. Their authors seem to believe that, in order for writers to turn themselves into as many Dostoevskys, *the* only

necessary and sufficient condition is to jot down dialogue lines conceived on the level of Dostoevsky's Smerdiakov. In my humble opinion, such a mimetic zeal is unnecessary; such a worship of troglodytic atavism is excessive. It amounts to the famed "bad mimesis," mimesis as race to the bottom: Zolian corruption … without Zola's (*real*-istic!) genius *for society's complexities*. In contrast — as novels such as, for example, Thomas Mann's anti-Nazi *Doktor Faustus* brilliantly show — great authors do not seek to *duplicate in and by their work* the simplistic, violent coarseness they decry. The challenge of art is, *in reality*, slightly more complex than that (and, as such, would require further, more specific treatment elsewhere).

And so it is that the Italian cinema of the early 21st century has been raising quite a number of clouds of dust that, in terms of real, enduring cinema, amount to nothing at all. Of course, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* was also a *noir*. But, at least, it was a *complex* one.

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The article

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