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criminal adaptations: successful artistic and cultural infidelities ioe culpepper

I steal from every single movie ever made [...] I steal from everything. Great artists steal, they don't do homages.

(Quentin Tarantino, who stole this line from T.S. Eliot)

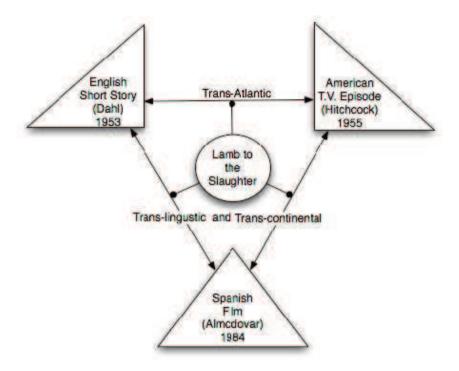
Steal once and they call you a plagiarist; steal a thousand times and they call you a genius. The art of adaptation is, in many ways, the art of creative thievery. Sometimes a story is lifted from one medium to another (such as from a novel to a film), but in some cases the act of theft crosses cultural borders rather than artistic ones. In 1994, Mike White accused filmmaker Quentin Tarantino of unfairly adapting Ringo Lam's Lung fu fong wan (1987) to create Reservoir Dogs (released in 1992). White constructed an 11-minute short film, titled Who Do You Think You're Fooling: The Story of a Robbery (1994), which juxtaposes the Hong Kong and the U.S. films' strikingly similar plot elements and camera angles. Closer scrutiny of this short piece of video criticism reveals that Tarantino and Lam's films complement each other intertextually - exploring interesting parts of the narrative left unexplored by the other. Here, however, I would simply like to signal the emotionally charged tone of White's title and how this example puts a new twist on an old prejudice that has consistently plagued adaptation criticism.

"Who do you think you're fooling?" is the rhetorical question shouted by the betrayed lover to the unfaithful partner. The question is actually a statement, which assumes guilt and expresses anger precisely because it is formed as a question: "you should have known better than to try and lie to me" is the veiled meaning. And although White's video criticizing Tarantino for not citing Lam's film as a source of inspiration is in many ways justified, the tone of its title echoes the counter-productive and self-righteous "infidelity" discourse found in much adaptation criticism.

In the introductory chapter of his Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Adaptation, Robert Stam identifies terms such as "infidelity," 'betrayal,' 'deformation,' 'violation,' 'bastardization,' 'vulgarization,' and 'desecration'" as indicators of the moralistic and presumptuous tone taken by many literary critics towards adaptations (3). Here, however, Stam is arguing against the classic prejudice of scholarly connoisseurs regarding works of literature adapted to film. Like the majority of criticism devoted to tackling questions of adaptation – George Bluestone's "The Limits of the Novel and the Limits of Film," Seymour Chatman's "What Novels Can Do that Films Can't (and Vice Versa)," and Bruce Morrissette's "Aesthetic Response to Novel and Film" to name just a few – Stam's approaches the issue of adaptation prejudice with the novel/film relationship at the theoretical forefront. But how do other types of adaptations inspire different types of bias?

Instead of thumbing his nose at an "inferior" filmic representation of a celebrated Jane Austen or Charles Dicken's story, Mike White expresses moral outrage of a different sort; it is as if Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* has cheated on him (the viewer) by sleeping with another text and then hiding that fact. In this instance of uncited, invisible, and unmarked adaptation, fidelity to the "original" text is not the main problem; instead, fidelity to the spectator (who wishes to be informed of such textual relations) is paramount. Is this shift in moral outrage indicative of the different attitudes concerning cross-medium adaptations (literature to film) versus like-medium adaptations (film to film)? And if so, how does the added element of a cross-cultural exchange influence the adaptation process?

To engage such questions, this paper will avoid using the staple food of literary criticism's diet: the novel. Instead, Alfred Hitchcock, Roald Dahl, and Pedro Almodóvar's versions of "Lamb to the Slaughter" – a television broadcast, a short story, and part of a film respectively - will be used to analyze the results of cross-cultural and cross-medium "translation." I place the word "translation" in quotation marks to indicate its near synonymous relationship to the concept of adaptation in this discussion. This theoretical proximity is only possible based on the new brand of translation criticism, which Linda Hutcheon describes as focused on the process of "transmutation or transcoding," basically the recoding of a text into "a new set of conventions as well as signs" (16). In A Theory of Adaptation, she also notes that this recent conception of translation is a far cry from old-school approaches, which idealize the "source" text and denigrate the "target" text. In the past, adaptation critics inherited translation critics' biases for the "original" or the "authentic" text; today, scholars are focusing more on the moment of contact and the process of transaction taking place as multiple languages or texts cross paths. As a professional translator, adapter and screenwriter has recently argued: translation is adaptation (Paquin 1). The Latin preposition trans – across, beyond or over – captures the movement of "Lamb to the Slaughter" from one continent and language to the next; the verb "adapt" - to fit or to modify - signals the text's multi-media recoding; the combination of these kinetic changes results in a holistic product of multidirectional intersections:



This diagram is by no means a complete model of "Lamb to the Slaughter" incarnations, there are surely others waiting to be discovered; therefore, it is not meant to imply that an "ideal" reader (no such person exists) needs all three versions mentioned to complete some textual puzzle and to unlock the secret meaning (no such thing exists) of this story. At the least, a perusal of each section of this text's tripartite, symbiotic existence will generate a better understanding of citation practices, different mediums' aesthetic techniques, and cultural modifications employed to make each adaptation successful. For example, both Alfred Hitchcock and Roald Dahl's' versions of the same story operate autonomously and independently, but together they reveal a unique short story to television and English to American translation.

To begin, three specific moments in the T.V. version will be isolated and compared to Dahl's prose version. This method of analysis attempts to read the two texts against the common critical grain, which often approaches adaptations as necessarily linear, chronological events; in other words, as a literary source and its filmic derivative or a primary and its secondary 1. Most often, of course, the order of a story's appearances in the artistic world has little to do with the order in which the spectator receives it. Despite the fact that Dahl's fiction was widely read in the U.S. when the short story was published (1953), Hitchcock's 1955 broadcast (or one of its subsequent rebroadcasts) more likely constitutes the average Anglophone's first reception of "Lamb to the Slaughter." Therefore, just as most people saw Mary Maloney murder Patrick Maloney for the first time on television, examples of differing artistic renderings will be analyzed via screen shots first and prose passages second.

Hitchcock's version uses a special technique to control the spectator's point of view and reception of the central narrative event in "Lamb to the Slaughter:" the unique way in which one shocked, desperate, and temporarily insane housewife kills her husband by hitting him on the back of the head with a frozen club of meat. The actual murder, which in both Hitchcock and Dahl's versions is surprisingly abrupt, is designed to catch the audience, like Patrick Maloney, completely off-guard. The following shot-by-shot analysis of the murder begins right after Mary has distractedly carried a frozen piece of meat from the garage into the kitchen. Though Patrick has just announced to his pregnant wife that he loves someone else and wants a divorce, Mary, in a daze of disbelief, automatically begins to prepare the evening meal:

> (Medium shot of Mary, her hands unwrap the leg of lamb for dinner on the kitchen table)

(Long shot of Patrick in the living room preparing to leave without his supper)

— "I'm leaving," he says.

(Medium close-up shot of Mary)

— "Patrick you can't. You can't go, you can't, you can't."

(The smooth shift from a medium shot to a medium close-up redirects the audience's view of Mary away from her hands and the huge leg of lamb on the table. The meal's main course, soon to be a murder weapon, is subtly placed off-screen, out of sight and out of mind. The more desperate tone in her voice and her increasingly distraught facial expression command the specators' attention and naturally motivate the camera's closer framing of her body. The audience, like Mary, has forgotten about the lamb on the table, because Patrick's impending departure demands more immediate attention).

— "No?"

(This is Patrick's disinterested response from the living room which openly

adjoins the kitchen.

His reply is strictly oral – the camera remains on Mary and her imploring face).

- "Patrick I won't let vou. I won't. I won't. I won't!"
- "There's no sense getting hysterical about this whole thing."

(The camera continues to hold Mary's face in a medium close-up).

- "Patrick I mean it!"

(Pause)

(Long shot through the open doorway of Patrick as he turns from the writing desk).

— "Try and stop me," he says.

(Back to the same medium close-up shot of Mary).

(At this point, Mary slowly, almost involuntarily, moves from the kitchen and through the doorway. The only sound heard is a scrape or two of her feet on the linoleum before she steps onto the living room carpet. The camera follows her movement, tracking from left to right, which reveals slightly more of Mary's figure as she approaches Patrick with an imploring look on her furrowed brow face. To the audience it appears that she is walking with her hands folded in front of her. As she moves from the living room to the kitchen, Patrick's figure, still standing and bending over the desk, enters the frame.)

(Only in the last second or two of this tracking shot is it noticeable that Mary holds onto something with both hands. By the time the audience realizes that she has invisibly carried the frozen leg of lamb with her from the kitchen, the murder is taking place. Suddenly her arms heave up, raising the club of meat into full view, right before crashing it down onto Patrick's unsuspecting head. Immediately afterwards, she stumbles in a trance-like stupor into the kitchen and puts the lamb onto a tray and into the oven.) ²

Hitchcock's masterful use of visual deception to surprise the audience is similar to the narrative technique known as "ellipsis." First of all, the above combination of passionate dialogue and subtle framing represents the filling in of an ellipsis left open by Dahl's original text. "Ellipsis," according to Robert Stam, occurs "where major or minor events are completely skipped over" (33). For example, the description of Patrick Maloney's murder in the short story is described by a mere six lines of prose:

"For God's sake," he said, hearing her, but not turning round. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out."

At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head.

She might just as well have hit him with a steel club (Dahl 111).

Hitchcock's scene breaks into and opens up this part of the narrative after Patrick's line "I'm going out" (or "I'm leaving," as is said in the television episode). Narratively and visually, the filmed segment adds dialogue, facial expressions, and physical movement that the prose version either leaves vague or does not provide at all. Because Hitchcock is turning an eight-and-one-half-paged story into a 23 minute television broadcast, he is able to spend extra time fleshing out the murder scene without eliminating important plot elements. His addition of detail and filmic sleight-of-hand with a leg of lamb does not slow down the action of the murder itself. The two presentations of Patrick's death each highlight the event's speed. Using two different artistic techniques, both versions deny premeditation on Mary's part and emphasize the unfortunate combination of an unfaithful husband, an unlikely murder weapon, an impulsive reaction and a moment of temporary insanity.

"Ellipsis" in both literature and film's terminologies also refers to the skipping over of larger narrative events as a whole in terms of discourse-time and story-time. Two other scenes, the one following the murder and the one preceding it, reveal artistic modifications made in Hitchcock's filmed narrative and Dahl's written one. After coming to her senses and putting the lamb into the oven to cook, Mary Maloney decides to cover up her crime. The audience watches her make a phone call, canceling a date the couple had arranged with friends, because Patrick is terribly "tired" and wants to have dinner at home. Mary then goes to the grocery store to buy some vegetables for the meal, creating an alibi for herself. Dahl's prose spans an entire page describing both Mary as she practices what she will say to the grocer and then the encounter itself, but Hitchcock uses ellipsis to rapidly move over this part of the narrative. The camera shows Mary leave the house and then a quick dissolve sequence of her items being rung up at the store,

indicating in a few seconds of visuals (discourse-time) the passage of a roughly twentyminute shopping trip (story-time). The next shot shows Mary returning home, pretending to discover her husband's dead body, and then crying and sobbing into the phone as she notifies the police. Hitchcock carefully places an ellipsis to visually gloss over the narrative's shopping trip - constituting an ellision of a minor event and certain details.

In another earlier scene, however, Hitchcock does just the opposite and fills in an ellipsis left open in Dahl's prose. To describe the initial confrontation between Patrick and Mary and the revelation of his extramarital affair Dahl simply writes: "And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word" (110). Here, there is a specific reference to four or five minutes of story-time passing that the author tells the reader to skip-over in discourse-time. The script (also written by Dahl) as adapted and filmed by Hitchcock fills in the "he told her" ellipsis with specific dialogue and details:

- "I wanna leave you, Mary. You understand me don't you. I want to leave vou."
- "You don't mean that."
- "Yes I do mean it, and what's more I want a divorce. There's someone else I want to marry. That's really all there is to it. I love her and she loves me. Now, we've got to be sensible about it all – calm and sensible. I'll arrange for the divorce. You'll have the baby, naturally..."3

By making Patrick's declaration of infidelity more explicit in the T.V. broadcast, Hitchcock quickly establishes the harsh facts of the situation and presents Patrick as a cold, and indifferent person. Today, the effect of the prose line "he went further and further away from her" might be simulated using sound (by reducing the volume of Patrick's voice until it is completely muted for example), but Hitchcock's reaction shots of Mary's facial expression clearly indicate the emotional distancing taking place. Furthermore, such an unusual sound effect would have broken with the fairly conservative television conventions of the 1950s. More important than the technique chosen is the fact that Hitchcock's version embellishes some segments of the "Lamb to the Slaughter" narrative, while skipping over others developed at greater length in the short story. More than once, ellipsis represents a ficional give and take between these two texts. Read together, these versions of the same basic story combine to form a richer and more asthetically complex murder mystery. This intersection of two very different mediums also reveals an act of cultural and linguistic translation between two distinct English-speaking countries.

Though the theme of marital infidelity and the 1950s gender role represented by Mary's character are all relevant to English, American, and (soon-to-be-discussed) Spanish audiences, the way the murder weapon is described changes with each retelling of the story. Comparing Hitchcock and Dahl's versions, little linguistic markers appear at odd yet significant moments and signal the presence of cultural modifications. "Lamb to the Slaughter" adapts its language depending on its geographic location.

Although the English Mary and the American Mary are both stereotypical examples of a 1950s homemaker, they have two different vocabularies. This fact is most noticable during a scene when detective Jack Noonan (who has the same name in both versions) questions Mary about possible murder weapons. The central source of suspense and tension in both Hitchcock and Dahl's storys' results from the investigators' inability to discover the implement of Patrick Maloney's demise. Mary has, of course, cleverly hidden the instrument of death in the most unlikely of places – inside the oven - and must play dumb. Both detectives explain that they are searching for a heavy, blunt object and ask her if there is anything in the house that might meet that description. Do you have something like a club or "a heavy metal bar," suggests Noonan to the American Mary who then replies: "oh, like a baseball bat?" Do you have something "like a big spanner," suggests the English Jack Noonan to the English Mary (115). The difference may seem a triffle, but use the word "spanner" instead of "wrench" on American television and 80% of the viewing public will have no idea what object is being described. Likewise, the average English household might have a "cricket" bat around, but not a single piece of equipment used to play American baseball. At the end of the Hitchcock Presents episode – as the worn out and hungry detectives devour the leg of lamb Mary has offered them for dinner - one of the Irish policemen even uses the word "shillelagh" to imagine what could have been used for the crime. This nuance points to the stereotypical "Irish cop" character within U.S. film's discourse (particularly strong during the 1950s). Each culture invokes different linguistic codes to conjure up images of potential weapons. The overall text of these two versions are remarkably similar (mostly because Dahl wrote both of them). At the end of the short story and the T.V. episode, Mary has the last laugh and literally chuckles as the police gorge themselves and wonder outloud about the missing weapon: "probably right under our very noses?" (116).

Oddly enough, the first shot of the same investigation scene in Pedro Almodóvar's version of "Lamb to the Slaughter" is a close-up of a Spanish detective's nose hovering above a bowl of cooked meat. At this exact moment, another officer is heard saying that the crime must have been committed using a very blunt object. Many of the same key elements composing the English and American versions are present in this third take on the narrative including the interogation of the murderess (this time she is named Gloria). However, ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? (1984) [What Have I Done to Deserve This?] comes out about thirty years after Dahl and Hitchcock's versions and is a strange mixture of both. The simultaneous influence of both the U.S. and English texts are in evidence during the quick paced interview conducted by two idiotic officers. "¿Buscas algo?" (Looking for something?) asks Gloria, and the two policemen (P1 and P2) rattle off a round of staccato questioning:

P1: ¿Tiene usted una barra de hierro?

P2: ¿Un bate de béisbol? P1: ¿Una llave inglesa?

P1: Do you have a metal bar?

P2: a baseball bat? P1: a monkey wrench?⁴

Aside from these two implicit markers from the other texts (the basball bat and the "llave inglesa"), there are also key plot similarities. However, Gloria is an entirely different cultural product than the two Marys.

Almodóvar's film is a melodramatic (yet also tragic) satire of a stereotypically traditional Spanish family. Being released only five years after Franco's death, it aims to subvert the normative values established during the years of his regime. Instead of a short narrative about the picture-perfect 1950s family destroyed by a husband's infidelity and subsequent murder, Gloria's life is a post-modern portrayal of dysfunction. One of her sons deals drugs; another is sold to a pedophilic dentist; and her best friend, Cristal, is a prostitute. Gloria is hooked on "No-Doz" (alertness pills), because when she is not cooking and cleaning for everyone at home, she hires herself out as a maid to both a Karate studio and a wealthy author. When she finally snaps — clubbing her unfaithful

and physically abusive husband with a leg of lamb - she represents a different kind of female protagonist. When the English or American Patrick Maloney dies the audience is shocked; when the Spanish Antonio is killed the audience is relieved (even feeling joy and liberation). The former male character is dislikeable, but the latter is a disgustingly macho oppressor. He uses Gloria's bobby pins to clean his ears; he makes no effort to please her sexually; he forbids her to work outside of the home; and, just before his murder, Antonio slaps his wife for refusing to iron a shirt he wants to wear for a date with Ingrid Muller (his former German mistress). The audience empathizes as Gloria fights back, putting an end to both him and the legacy of misogynistic entitlement his character embodies.

Almodóvar's placement of the short "Lamb to the Slaughter" narrative within his feature length film is both a subtle hommage (to Hitchcock and Dahl) and a clever rendition of the suppressed housewife's revenge. Despite many changes - the police do not actually consume the murder weapon, a green lizard dies who is the crime's "único testigo" [only witness], and Gloria lives in one of Madrid's giant, poverty-stricken, cube-like housing projects – there are still key characteristics and easily identifiable traits shared by all three stories. Almodóvar's version is such a free and unfaithful adaptation of the two others that it is difficult to find a particular moment where he obviously opens up and enters into a particular part of a previously established narrative. There are no striking camera shot similarities between his and Hitchcock's presentations. Furthermore, the techniques of such a post-modern film (filled with fragmented allusions to other texts and disjointed chronological events) make it difficult to draw direct aesthetic comparisons to the straight-forward linear storytelling of the T.V. episode or the short story. Therefore, the film's real contribution to this article's tripartite model of textual co-presence lies in its cultural difference and more feminist protagonist.

Culturally and politically, Almodóvar adds a strain of convention-breaking rebellion to the textual mix. Regardless of their individual contributions, together the U.S., English, and Spanish tellings of the same murder mystery represent a successful, multi-directional, multi-media, and multi-linguistic translation of "Lamb to the Slaughter."

Final Thoughts: A Note on the Possibility of Endless Citation.

Any text that has "slept with" another text, as a postmodern wag once put it, has also slept with all the other texts that that other text has slept with.

— Robert Stam

The Internet Movie Database's current entry for ¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? lists Roald Dahl as a contributing author with the note: "Lamb to the Slaughter (uncredited source)." Why is there no mention of Alfred Hitchcock's name or of his 1955 broadcast?

The fact that the T.V. version was careful to credit Dahl as author makes perfect sense, because he wrote the screenplay. But why chastise Almodóvar, who wrote a screenplay with quite loose references to Dahl's short story, for not citing the English author? Furthermore, is it not possible that the short story was inspired by an uncited source? It is difficult to explain exactly why and how adapted or translated material is referenced precisely because it travels between artistic mediums, languages and citation practices. Television and film are often careful when borrowing from written material, because the printed word has spent centuries constructing a legal system of fairly standardized and rigorous guidelines. But despite film and television's less defined conventions for quoting or borrowing material, Alfred Hitchcock is arguably as famous a director as Roald Dahl is an author and deserves equal recognition. This pairing of two celebrities from two different mediums offers fertile ground for further research on the question of adaptation citation. It turns out that a large number (at least five) of the Hitchcock Presents episodes were adaptations of Dahl's stories. Therefore, it is likely that many modern-day directors who were influenced by Hitchcock will retell, in part or in whole, those stories. By doing so, they may unconsciously adapt both his and Dahl's work. In such cases, cases of adaptations inspired by adaptations, what is the filmmaker's responsibility?

In his contribution to Four Rooms (1995), Quentin Tarantino self-reflexively cites Alfred Hitchcock's T.V. broadcast "Man from the South" (also a Roald Dahl short story) as a source. However, the credits of Four Rooms make no explicit reference to either Dahl or Hitchcock. The case of Tarantino brings this exploration of adaptation, translation and fidelity round full circle. Change partners and do-si-do! The question remains - where does cross-medium and cross-cultural citation end?

notes

- ¹ Here I cite another two appropriately titled articles: "From Novel to Film" (Michael Cunningham) and "Films Out of Books" (David Glassco).
- ² This section is a combination of quotes transcribed from Hitchcock's episode and my own commentary.
- ³ All quotes are transcribed from Hitchcock's 1955 episode "Lamb to the Slaughter."
- ⁴ Spanish quotes have been transcribed from the film and the English translations are my own.

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