

The phenomenology of adaptation of classics: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as viewed  
by Ingmar Bergman's and Woody Allen's perspectives

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A Brief Introduction

Dear reader, this paper was firstly conceived for the annual Festival of Original Theatre (FOOT) at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto in February, 2006. Since it was extensively supported by clips of the films at stake, there are markers of a live interlocution at times. In addition, the paragraphs have abrupt transitions at times. However, it was a conscious choice not to alter the presentation. After all, I was invited to share the paper given at a conference and find it sensible to resist the temptation of refining the text to the point that the palimpsest would not be recognized any longer. In addition, for the lovers of adaptations, the essential mission is accomplished: a route to three interrelated masterpieces is drawn here. And last but not least feedback is welcome. sergio.melo@utoronto.ca

The Thing Itself

Convinced that there is no way of creating a new cultural artefact other than dialoguing with tradition, I am focusing on two (more than) free adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, because both Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (*Sommarnattens Leende*) and Woody Allen's *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* are almost unrecognizable as works inspired by the Shakespearean classic. Therefore, I will concentrate on the *intertextuality* among these texts after discussing briefly what I understand by the terms "classic" and "intertextuality" vis-à-vis adaptation.

Once the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup> was told that a book which identified the sources of his literary work had been published. His reaction was laughter. Aware that he had been genetically designed to become blind, Borges read all he could before reaching adulthood. As a child, he already pictured paradise as the mythical library of Babel, in which the labyrinths of time and space interconnected.

In 1941, Borges published a narrative about an absurd interconnectedness of texts entitled “Pierre Menard, Author of *The Quixote*”<sup>2</sup>, which describes a twentieth-century French novelist who decides to rewrite Cervantes’ classic, “word for word and line-for-line”<sup>3</sup>, identical to the original, as an artefact of his own imagination. The narrator, a literary reviewer, regards Menard's work as “much subtler”<sup>4</sup> and “infinitely richer”<sup>5</sup> than the Spanish classic because the modern context of Menard’s text imbues the exact same words with worthier meanings.

Because of this sardonic tale, “literary theorists (...) discovered in Borges’s texts insights to inform their structuralist and post-structuralist conceptualizations”<sup>6</sup>. My aim here is not to embrace the quixotic undertaking of tracing back the genealogy of *intertextuality*, but to point out that Kristeva’s concept has a long trajectory of interrelationship with preceding texts. Moreover, as Hans George Ruprecht observes, “the ‘intertextualitätdebatte’ (Schmelling 1988) has propagated numerous conceptual frameworks.”<sup>7</sup> I will abstain from listing the variety of terms that Hans Peter Mai describes as a “terminological inflation, [which does not constitute] a fertile elaboration of a sufficiently defined and agreed upon concept but rather a contest for meaning.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, according to Mai, “there does not exist anything like a coherent theory of intertextuality.”<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, in the so called *intertextuality debate*, I choose a carnivalesque approach that encourages me to resort to Barthes’ axiom that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author”<sup>10</sup> and use the concept of *intertextuality* in its elementary sense that all texts have their share of threads with other texts. If, as Kristeva rightly claims, “any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations”<sup>11</sup>, the relevance of a new mosaic necessarily consists of the original mode in which it re-creates tradition. After all, the driving force of a productive interlocution between a classic and a contemporary interpreter resides in the dislocation of the perspective inherent to the transformations that time and space implacably inflict on society, language, thought, and ipso facto in art.

This is why the narrator of one of Italo Calvino’s novels reckons that “between the blank sheet of paper and the boiling of the words and the stories which take shape and vanish away without being written by anyone there is this distressing diaphragm that is

myself, without which I couldn't write."<sup>12</sup> Calvino's narrator's diaphragm can be viewed as a metaphor for intersubjectivity<sup>13</sup>, which is the view that pursues objectivity through the awareness of a personal perception.

The intersubjective reception of a text leads us to one of Calvino's definitions of a classic as a text "to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it."<sup>14</sup> Thus, identification and disagreement are visceral responses that prompt an urge to interact with a text that resonates with irrepressible pathos. Because the present world may sound incompatible with a classic, a few readers will take it to heart and make an effort to "translate" it into a language that is better understood by their generation. In this sense, affirms Calvino, a classic is a work "that relegates the noise of the present to a background hum, which at the same time classics cannot exist without."<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, the contemporary world, with its resonance, is always the place where one reads from, and the adaptation of a classic must emerge from this context. Rewriting a classic, thus, corresponds to welcoming the challenge of expressing a treasured experience from the perspective given by both a culturally constructed frame of reference, conditioned by the variables time and space, and a spiritual disposition, which dreams of transcending the limits of history and geography, and exactly for this reason can bridge the classic to an entirely innovative work.

This reflection inveigles us to the predicament that there are indeed timeless themes, which may remain concealed from the immediate view of an era until an intersubjective perception decides to adapt it. From the Latin, *adaptare* means "to make apt, suitable". Consequently, to adapt a classic consists of making an acclaimed text suit an original form.

The classic on focus here is *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. In order to verify whether this Shakespearean comedy is indeed a classic, I propose some empirical research.... Please, put up your hand anyone who has not read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Since this play belongs to a category of texts presumably read by graduate drama students, who could be embarrassed to admit that actually they have never perused or even skimmed this play, I reckon that there might be a margin of failure in my empirical research. In any

case, I will deliberately concentrate on the filmic narratives, which are the adaptations of the classic read by everyone in this theatre.

I argue that both Bergman's and Allen's scripts share a number of *intertexts* with Shakespeare's play. However, their *intertextuality* is not explicit in that none of the adaptors reproduce plot situations from the palimpsest. Instead, *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* draw consistently upon the structure and the motifs of the Shakespearean comedy. For the scope of this paper, I will focus exclusively on five plot threads.

The first plot thread is beauty, viewed in its ambiguity of blessing and malediction insofar as it implies desire and fulfillment but also the grief derived from frustration and humiliation. The second is magic, the occurrence of supernatural interventions in the course of natural events, which, for this reason, can never be totally apprehended by reason. The third is animality, understood as the attribute whose existence is not characterized by being contradistinct to moral and spiritual qualities but by being indissociable from them. The fourth is a corollary of the third: jealousy, a feeling of possession, which leads to rivalry, which in turn may push characters into the jaws of death. The fifth is death itself, usually present in comedies to remind the audience of the possibility of the irreversible cessation of the vital functions of living beings so that the spectators can muse over a kind of "seize-the-day" message.

*Smiles of a Summer Night* was filmed in 1955 and *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* in 1982. Both filmic narratives take place at the turn of the nineteenth century, a time that epitomizes romance. In addition to the setting time, both comedies embody a set of vaudeville conventions - as if Bergman and Allen had adapted Shakespeare under the lenses of Feydeau and Labiche. Although none of the adaptations in case portray a young woman who refuses to submit to her father's will, patriarchal power is a meme in both texts. In Bergman's film, this theme is contrasted with the presence of two female characters: the emancipated actress Désirée and the liberated maid Petra. In Allen's movie, although still present, this thread is attenuated by the depictions of a suffragette, the independent and uncomplicated Dulcy, and Adrian, a writer with a large history of sexual adventures. Therefore, both filmic narratives portray the embodiment of a new

womanhood. As in the palimpsest, *qui pro quos* prompted by a maze of sex characterize the plot machinations which move the stories forward.

The first clue to Bergman's movie's *intertextuality* with Shakespeare's comedy is given by the very title of the film. *Smiles of a Summer Night* evokes the palimpsest's title. Taking into consideration that a title may be thought of as an abstract,<sup>16</sup> which has the function of summarizing the entire sequence of events of the narrative, the cultural reference of the English Renaissance immediately crosses the minds of readers/viewers who are familiarized with the Shakespearean classic. In addition to that, the genre to which the film belongs is made manifest by the heading that follows the title in a smaller font reads "a romantic comedy". Consequently, applying Jean-Paul Sartre's literary concept to the experience of viewing a film, one could affirm that the "pact of generosity between author and reader"<sup>17</sup> is established inasmuch as the filmic narrative promises to be a romantic comedy, which will almost certainly provide the viewer with some laughter and a happy ending.

One of the first scenes of *Smiles of a Summer Night* is an insight into theory disguised as a naïve comment. A photographer, who has recently finished a set of pictures of the young Anne Egerman (Ulla Jakobson), shows his artifacts to Fredrik Egerman (Gunnar Björnstrand), her mature husband. When Fredrik, enchanted by his wife's pictures, affirms that the photographer's work is "an outstanding artistic achievement", the photographer replies that "the subject is always paramount." The "motif", the Swedish word in the original script, is the fulcrum of the theorization. Beauty is indeed one of the most important themes of romance, and is substantially present in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The memes of jealousy and rivalry are introduced in the first scene that portrays the Egermans: the mature lawyer Fredrick, his young wife Anna, and the son of Fredrick's first marriage, Henrik (Björn Bjelvenstam). The jealousy between rivals is potentialized in this narrative by the fact that the rivalry is between father and son, a taboo that, at the turn of the nineteenth-century, as much as nowadays, is more shocking in Western cultures than that of a father's authority over a daughter's fate insofar as it implies not only an interdicted sexuality but an unnatural one – even if in this case the unnaturalness is not biological because the lovers are not true relatives. Since this introduction of the

relationship among the Egermans, it is suggested that Fredrick probably suspects that his son fancies Anne. Fredrick's facial expression after suggesting that he and Anne take a power nap bears out sarcasm towards Henrik. Although the rivalry is never explicitly confronted by the two characters, it evokes the disdain with which Lysander and Demetrius treat each other.

One of the threads of jealousy in *Smiles of a Summer Night* may be viewed as echoing Helena's self-indulgent admiration for Hermia's beauty. At the theatre with Fredrik, the gorgeous and juvenile Anne has a moment of sublime resignation when she acknowledges that the actress Désirée (Eva Dahlbeck), whom she knows to be her rival, is so beautiful.

The occurrences of the thread animality start when Fredrick and Anne are in bed after they leave the theatre without seeing the play upon Anne's request. The first occurrence, as all of the occurrences of the thread animality in *Smiles of a Summer Night*, is embedded in the dialogue. In this specific scene there is a juxtaposition of threads in that the dialogue also regards beauty. Anne's assertion about Frederick's attraction to her clearly alludes to the celebrated fairy tale by Perrault: "And the wolf thought 'I wonder what that girl tastes like'". Sexual attraction – as the narrative reminds us – is a feature of the animal realm, to which human beings belong.

The next sequence, namely the one in which Fredrick goes again to the theatre to meet Désirée, reinforces the association of animality and mankind. As soon as Désirée sees Fredrick, she welcomes him with the following greeting: "Fredrick, you old goat, you brute, long-nosed camel. You are looking unusually human." Fredrick is concerned about his marriage, and it is exactly because he lays bare his irrational fears that he appears to be unusually human to Désirée's eyes. Again a resemblance to Bottom's partial zoomorphism is evoked.

The next clip is very subtle in its reference to magic. Désirée, using a cane, pantomimes an archer with a bow. Far from a woman warrior, she moves with distinguished grace and sings "And if we never loved. Oh. What would we do in life?" Even if the reference to Cupid, the divine match-maker, is brief and subtle here, later on the character will prove to have a few of Oberon's or Puck's attributes.

Another example of the use of the threads of jealousy and rivalry can be detected in the whole sequence in which the Count Carl Magnus Malcolm (Jarl Kulle) makes it clear that the confrontation between himself and, Fredrick, whom he (rightly) regards as his rival, may take the form of a life-and-death duel. The tune that Fredrick whistles is a clear citation of Mozart's Don Giovanni, whose protagonist's seductiveness ends up leading to his tragic death. And certainly there is more animality in that Carl Magnus declares that "I openly admit that I do not tolerate pugs, lapdogs, cats or so-called old friends."

The subsequent scene has another reference to animality. Mrs. Armfeldt (Naima Wifstrand) asks her daughter Désirée: "Do you really love that ass?" Thus, at this time, the animal in question is exactly the one into which Bottom is transformed. In the same scene Désirée and her mother start plotting their intervention in the lives of the other lovers of the story. Désirée and Mrs. Armfeldt will alternate leadership in the endeavour and, consequently, the roles of Oberon and Puck.

The introduction of the Countess Charlotte Malcolm (Margit Carlqvist) on horseback galloping in a bucolic location underlines the character's noble attributes, which she shares with Hypolita. However, because Bergman does not use Shakespeare's characters as fixed matrixes for any of the characters in *Smiles of a Summer Night*, Charlotte soon reveals that she represses an insane jealousy and has the potential to lose her mind, just like Helena. In the sequence in which Charlotte and Malcolm talk about his confrontation of Fredrick Désirée's home the previous night, the threads of jealousy and animality are justifiably interlaced. After Malcolm bluntly declares to Charlotte that "My wife may cheat on me. But if anyone touches my mistress, I become a tiger!", she hot-headedly shoots at the window-pane of the door that he has just closed behind him. This segment explicitly echoes Helena's total loss of dignity before her impetuous love.

The following fragment radicalizes the thread of death. More firm in his intent of committing suicide than Hamlet, Henrik really takes action to pursue his objective. However, his plan of hanging himself fails regardless of his determination. The fortunate reversal evokes Bottom's conclusion about his extraordinary experience in a reversed key. Whereas Bottom is irremediably miserable for reckoning that his "most rare vision" is over, Henrik is incredulous about the amazingly fortunate outcome of his action. It is

worth noting that the cherub in the setting may be viewed as another evocation of Puck's or Oberon's presences.

Far from having the intention of exhausting the possibilities of identifying common plot threads between *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I will investigate now an analogous interconnectedness between the palimpsest and *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, which was made as homage to Bergman, whom he considers the genius of the twentieth-century cinema. Allen's film's title, which encompasses the palimpsest's title almost in its complete form, incorporates the genre, which, as I said before, is a pact between the author and the audience. Moreover, Allen spices up the heading with the word "sex" replacing the word "dream", as though reality were being emphasized, and sex – a corollary of the plot threads beauty, animality, jealousy, and magic (in its aspect of seduction) and death (in its aspect of transformation, either negative or positive) –, were the most immediate common denominator of the story. It is worth noting that Allen's opening credits are viewed to the sound of the *Wedding March*, the most celebrated piece of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, another unmistakable reference to the palimpsest.

The next clip starts with a shot of Andrew (Woody Allen), who is an amateurish inventor and the owner of the summer house where the three couples spend a weekend. Then there is a shot of the moon, also a motif of the palimpsest. Subsequently, the filmic narrative focuses on the spirit ball, one of Andrew's inventions, which, he hopes, will allow human beings contact with the "other" world. With Mendelson's music on the background, the "other world" is viewed as if from the spirit ball's perspective; it is the world of nature, which suggests that the "other world" is everywhere as one of the Fairies says:

Over hill, over dale,  
Thorough bush, thorough brier,  
Over park, over pale,  
Thorough flood, thorough fire,  
I do wander everywhere, (2, 1)

The following clip illustrates the conflict between human instincts (animality) and their repression. In the same way as the first scene of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

which portrays a conflict between Theseus and Hypolita, Andrew and Adrian (Mary Steenburgen) discuss about their sexual life as a couple. The repressed Adrian is disturbed with her husband's animal instincts and their manifestations such as salivation. However, sooner than later, it is Adrian who shows signs of irrationality and jealousy. She recognizes that Ariel (Mia Farrow) is a potential rival.

The sequence of the three couples in the forest has a scene that illustrates death. Maxwell (Tony Roberts) is wearing a hat and a fawn-coloured shirt. Challenging Leopold's (Jose Ferrer) idea that certain mushrooms they have come across are poisonous, Maxwell eats one of them and feels unwell. He runs away from the group and is followed by Adrian, who takes him an antidote. Surprisingly, in a passionate impetus, Maxwell, who has a dark beard and wears a fawn-coloured shirt, takes off his straw hat and kisses Adrian. Because the vegetation covers the view of Maxwell's lower body, the dim image framed by the perspective of the spirit ball suggests a centaur.

The next clip depicts Maxwell hurt by an arrow shot by the jealous Leopold, who returns home imbued with so much animality that he makes love to Dulcy (Julie Hagerty), the liberated nurse and dies happily after the climax of the wild sexual intercourse. As far as I know, Leopold's death a total innovation in the treatment of the motif. Here death is not glorified as a sacrifice in the name of a heroic accomplishment. Instead, it is the reward of a man who finally accepts that reality, just like drama: "more witnesseth than fancy's images, and grows to something of great constancy; but howsoever, strange and admirable." (5,1)

It is also admirable that no one is immune to history. I believe this is why Bergman and Allen paid their tribute to Shakespeare even though their diaphragms propelled completely autonomous mosaics in consonance with the background hum of their own time and space. According to Borges, who argued that he derived more joy from the books he read than from the books he wrote, "all writers create their predecessors."<sup>18</sup> Indeed we do... because, although it is indisputable that the meaning of a message is concretized by a reception, it takes a great amount of individual sweat to adapt and re-adapt threads magnificently woven. The mirth of the reader must be at the cost of the depth of the author.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fernando Savater. Jorge Luis Borges/ Vidas Literarias. (Barcelona: Ediciones Omega, S.A., 2002) 25-27 and Bella Jozef. Jorge Luis Borges (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves Editora, 1996) unnumbered.

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges. "Pierre Menard, el Autor del Quijote". In Ficciones (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1971), 45-57.

<sup>3</sup> Borges 49-50 (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> Borges 53.

<sup>5</sup> Borges 54.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Yates. Jorge Luis Borges: Life, Work, and Criticism (Fredericton: York Press, 1985), 31

<sup>7</sup> H. G. Ruprecht. "The Reconstruction of Intertextuality". In Intertextuality: Research in Text Theory (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 70.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Peter Mai. "Bypassing Intertextuality: Hermeneutics, Textual Practice, Hypertext". In Intertextuality: Research in Text Theory (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Mai 237.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author", in Image, Music, and Text: texts selected and translated by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 148.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva. "Word, Dialogue, and Novel." in Desire and Language (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

<sup>12</sup> Italo Calvino. Se Una Notte d'Inverno Un Viaggiatore (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), 199 (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Robert C. Solomon. "Intersubjectivity" in Phenomenology and Existentialism (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 420-454.

<sup>14</sup> Italo Calvino, Why Read the Classics. Translated by Martin McLaughlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Calvino 8.

<sup>16</sup> M.L. Pratt (1977) Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 60-61. Pratt has underlined both the importance and the role of headings, titles, subtitles and pre-discourses in the assignment of provisional expectations on the part of the reader when dealing with written text. Pratt, for instance, emphasises the importance of titles in both Chapters and novels because, she argues, they are a literary correlate to the Labovian concept of abstract in oral narratives. For Pratt, titles function as a short summary of the point of the story, preceding that which Labov (1972) has called orientation. Furthermore, Pratt considers that these written markers have the same function as an 'invitation' to readers to commit themselves in accepting the role of narrative audience.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. "What is Literature?" in What Is Literature and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 61.

<sup>18</sup> Borges in Savater. "Kafka y sus Precursores" (1951). In "Selección de textos", in Jorge Luis Borges/ Vidas Literarias (Barcelona: Ediciones Omega, S.A., 2002), 174. (my translation)