

2022 IWL, Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz
“World Literature & Cinema” Colloquium



Colloquium leader: Dr. Cezar Gheorghe – University of Bucharest

A diverse group of 13 participants attended the 2022 IWL “World Literature & Cinema” Colloquium, including undergraduates, MA students, PhD Candidates, faculty members, as well as independent researchers from different countries and continents.

The aim of each colloquium session – in which three or four participants presented their papers and were assigned respondents – was to investigate the way in which literature circulates beyond the borders of a national community, but also beyond the borders of the medium of literature, either through direct or free adaptations of literary works to film, or by engaging in an intermedial dialogue, in which *literariness* and the *cinematic* are considered mixed, impure qualities.

After a general introduction, in which each participant has stated his or her affiliation and research interests, Maren Loveland, from Vanderbilt University, kicked off the first session of the colloquium with her presentation on “The Tennessee Valley Authority as Socialist Cinematic Enterprise”. The presentation focused on highlighting the way in which certain social “texts” have permeated the discourse of state produced utilitarian films that were distributed to a wide audience in 1930s and 40s. The presentation has shown how, in these types of films, the state was giving instructions on how to live properly, how to sustain a certain lifestyle, and how to interact with the environment. Maren Loveland has analysed the films in the tradition of the soviet montage theorists of the 1930s, in which intellectual montage (as theorized by Sergei Eisenstein) and nondiegetic elements of discourse were used to promote a political aesthetics regarding infrastructure, social projects and ideas about progress in society.

Nicholas Tyler Reich’s presentation “Trans in Citation; or, Inter(s)extuality” analysed how Bertrand Mandico’s *Les garçons sauvages* (2017) deploys a citational praxis in the tradition of queer avant-garde cinema in order to interrogate the use of trans/gender in catastrophe mitigation. The citations imported into the cinematic “text” of Modico range from William S. Burroughs’s dystopian novel, *The Wild Boys* to several other film re-workings and adaptations of the Wild Child character. According to Nicholas Tyler Reich, “Mandico’s inter(s)extual mise-en-scène cultivates a complex ecology of texts through formal and diegetic gestures while scrutinizing that textual network’s claims on images of ‘natural’ ecology, or trans and intersex bodies. This intertextual synthesis reveals certain cinematic conceptions of racialized gender as a particularly ecological idea that is already deeply citational, stemming from the queer avant-garde as well as other kinds of more or less established cinema”.

The first colloquium session was concluded by the presentation “‘Luscious’ and ‘Provocative’: Confronting the Male Gaze in The Yacoubian Building” by Amy Groves from

Simon Fraser University. The paper proposed a critical political reading of Alaa Al Aswany's novel, *The Yacoubian Building*, by using concepts imported from Film Studies that focused on the analysis of the gaze (such as Laura Mulvey's seminal text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*) in order to highlight the construction of female representation in the novel "as both undermining and reinforcing patriarchal ideology and social structures". Engaging with Mulvey's famous concept, Amy Groves showed that in the novel (adapted to film and television) the male gaze is used "as a means of indirect control and possession over its female object". According to the author of the presentation, the reader adopts this highly cinematic and problematic construction of the gaze in the reading of the literary work.

The second session of the colloquium started with the presentation "Lines of Origin: The Super Hero Origin Story of Lisbeth Salander, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*" made by Bertha Vasquez. In order to trace the Super Hero origin story of the female protagonist in the famous Stieg Larsson nordic noir novel, the paper uses the examples of this character construction in several adaptations of the novel: the Swedish film, as directed by Niels Arden Oplev (2009), the American film, directed by David Fincher (2011) and the graphic novel by British writer Denise Mina (2012). All the adaptations analysed show qualities that are common to the definition given by Peter Coogan, a scholar of the superhero genre quoted in the presentation. The conclusion of the presentation is two-folded. First, there is a place for genre literature in the larger framework of World Literature. Secondly, there is a place for the superhero genre in literary studies, by "providing concrete definitions for literary characters such as Lisbeth Salander".

In the second presentation of the day, "Revisiting and engaging with a traumatic past. Collective and personal loss in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York*", Carina Iulia Chereji has looked at "the way trauma transcends timelines and impacts the past-present dynamic". She has considered the two works

mentioned above as literary and cinematic answers to trauma integration. In both works, “the act of revisiting and engaging with the past from the standpoint of an uneventful present leaves room for avoidance, on the one hand, and for obsession on the other”. The paper has looked “at the potential of small, personal experiences to overcome and engulf the grand narrative that makes up the fabric of reality as it settles after traumatic events perturbed it”. The link between literature and cinema was established through the conceptual framework of trauma studies.

Christopher M. Flakus has tackled a subgenre of transgressive cinema, which he has deemed “The New Cinema of Evil”. Starting from the remarks made by Georges Bataille in his seminal study, *Literature and Evil* and referencing classical transgressive literature texts by the Marquis de Sade, the starting point of the presentation was *Salò*, Pasolini’s last work as the inaugural film of the cinema of evil. This mapping of the evolution of the cinema of evil continues with Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games*, *We need to talk about Kevin*, by Lynne Ramsay, *Hellraiser* by Clive Barker and *Martyrs* by Pascal Laugier. According to Christopher M. Flakus, all films engage with the concept of Abjection through the “powers of horror” as theorised by Julia Kristeva and with Bataille’s notion of expenditure in the construction of subjectivity and personal identity.

Beginning the third colloquium session with the presentation “Grendel’s Mother Speaking Through the Screen”, Denisse Luna Maldonado has traced the famous antagonist character in *Beowulf* as the archetypal monstrous mother in three films: *The Ring* (2002), *The Woman in Black* (2012) and *The Others* (2001). Like in the classical English poem, all of the films mentioned construct a narrative in which dramatic action is moved forward by the notion of motherhood and fear. The figure of the single mother exists in the films in what Homi Bhabha calls “in between space”, while at the same time being a theatre device that structures the space of the narrative and the power dynamic between the characters.

While highlighting once again the role of genre literature as World Literature, Amina Antonia Touzos has analysed the several adaptations of Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* – films, videogames and graphic novels and the way this type of transmedial translation turns the fantasy series in a subgenre of World Literature as mediated by other non-literary artistic expressions. The issue of adaptation is tackled through the problem of aesthetics, source-texts and questions of origin and socio-cultural implications. In the presentation, the concept of adaptation itself is questioned through the lens of what adaptation studies deems „fidelity criticism”. The presentation promotes the idea that “Sapkowski's fantasy novels are, though heavily influenced by Slavic folklore and the European Middle Ages, ‘not particularly interested in the geography of stories, the characters' languages, or maintaining realism. It is a kind of patchwork in which social relations become key factors. Within these social relations, novels explicitly address themes of racial discrimination, migration, and marginalization as central storylines – regardless of the characters' gender, race, or ethnicity.” The study of the adaptations deals with the same issues.

In “Reaching the Present: Acceptance and Commitment Therapeutic Techniques in Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz*”, Meghan Hodges has offered a dense reading of the Guzman film as a way of dealing with Chile's collective national trauma from the Augusto Pinochet era. By focusing on the issue of time and the disrupting effect traumatic events have had on the representation of time, the reading invites a therapeutic understanding of the quest made by the travellers in the film. As Meghan Hodges has noted, the director “utilizes a particularly Chilean vehicle to become such a researcher: astrophysical phenomena”. By bringing in Carlo Rovelli's analysis of time, the paper has focused on demonstrating “to what extent . . . the Theories of Relativity and the Laws of Conservation serve to process trauma in a society deeply rooted in the astrological. Guzmán's work, itself an act of ACT (Acceptance

and Commitment Therapy), proposes to take Chile through its past and into the present by demonstrating that the space-time continuum offers both catharsis and/or eternal suffering”.

In her presentation, Katie Chow Wing Tung has asked the question “How politically correct should a film be?” The paper investigates the impact that recent social discussions on race, gender and ethnicity have had on the production of popular films. The author is preoccupied with the politics of representation in Disney film franchises and other films, the ultimate question being: “How should film strike a balance between political correctness and entertainment?”.

The final session of the colloquium has started with the presentation “‘Author Here’: Within and Beyond Postmodern Metafiction. A Case Study of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* and Radu Jude’s *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*”, delivered by Raul Săran. He was preoccupied with the investigation of the concept of metafiction as a distancing device used both by writers like David Foster Wallace and film directors like Radu Jude. The paper has moved to a “comparative analysis of two works in which the same technique is being used in the same manner, yet in two different artistic environments: *The Pale King*, David Foster Wallace’s unfinished novel – where we will look at the ‘Author’s Foreword’ section of the novel, in which Wallace himself appears to address directly to the reader – as well as Radu Jude’s *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, where we will analyse the second part of the movie, known as *Short dictionary of anecdotes, signs and wonders*”. In mapping the way in which the two authors use metafiction, Raul Săran has shown that this technique also redefines the rules of storytelling and reframes narrative discourse by constant defamiliarisation of the fabula elements.

“*Soldiers: Story from Ferentari as Adaptation Queer and Roma Representation in Romanian Society*” was the title of the presentation given by Cezar Gheorghe. It focused on the way the novel by Adrian Schiop and the film adaptation by Ivana Mladenovic have

represented queer sexuality and the Roma minority and the differences brought on by the adaptation process. The discursive limits of the autofictional narrative of the novel were discussed in connection with the representation of the queer, often racialized bodies in the film. The paper has underlined the cinematic solutions the medium of cinema can offer by overcoming the limits of representation of these bodies in the literary medium.

Finally, the last presentation of the colloquium, given by Moeka Taguchi, was titled “‘Lean In’ Feminism in *Legally Blonde*”. Her presentation has focused on the dissemination of neoliberal feminism, as expressed by Sheryl Sandberg book *Lean In*, in the romantic comedy genre, specifically in the Hollywood blockbuster, *Legally Blonde*. Moeka Taguchi has argued that the “problematic idea seen in the book *Lean In* is that the author thinks that women should be liberated by the individual effort like improvement of self-assessment, not by political action . . . most women who could become leaders of a big company or leaders of society live a privileged lifestyle”. The paper proposed that the same neoliberal ideas are to be found in the plot of the film.

In the concluding remarks of the colloquium, all the participants assessed the notion of circulation of World Literature via the medium of cinema or via other film-inspired mediums of artistic expression. The notion of adaptation was reframed as a transmedial, transcultural “translation”, a nonlinear, unbalanced transfer from the national space of singular literary works to the transnational world literary space, in which political issues of autonomy, domination and power are tackled on a global scale.