

## Language and Identity in Vittorio Alfieri's *Vita*

Elena Borelli

Rutgers University

### *Abstract*

*In this essay I read Vittorio Alfieri's autobiography, his Vita, with a focus on his linguistic transition from his original French/Piedmontese bilingualism to Tuscan monolingualism, which he narrates there.*

*I address the traditional depiction of Alfieri as a 'man of Italy', which his linguistic choice seems to reinforce. Specifically, I argue that he acquired Tuscan as a foreign language and he viewed it as being prestigious precisely because it was foreign. Moreover, I read his Tuscanization in the context of Alfieri's own views on languages and the role they play in the construction of his identity. My reading of his Vita is supported by the historical context in which it was written, namely that of eighteenth-century Piedmont, and by Elio Gioanola's psychoanalytical interpretation of Alfieri's dichotomous self.*

*I suggest that Alfieri's adoption of Tuscan was not a return to his true origins but rather reflected his desire to construct a new identity for himself. Tuscan is the language of the 'other', that is, the illustrious literary canon to which he strives to belong. Furthermore, the transition reflects Alfieri's peculiar duality between his negative 'self' and the positively perceived 'other'. Alfieri's linguistic journey as described in his Vita represents both his conquest of 'otherness' and the acquisition of a monolingual identity.*

The problem of language is a recurrent theme in Vittorio Alfieri's autobiography. Alfieri describes his linguistic switch from the French/Piedmontese vernacular bilingualism of his childhood and education to Tuscan monolingualism as a story of 'conversion'. According to Gianfranco Contini, Alfieri belongs to, and initiates, the line of the non-Florentine contributors to the 'fiorentinita'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Alfieri struggles to 'dislocate' himself linguistically in order to adopt and master the Tuscan language, which was initially almost completely foreign to him. With the exception of Tuscany, Tuscan was primarily known only

---

<sup>1</sup> Gianfranco Contini, *Varianti e altra linguistica. Una raccolta di saggi (1938-1968)* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970), p. 629. Contini acknowledges the role played by those native speakers of Tuscan who helped non-native writers develop their competence and oral fluency in this language. Alfieri is counted among those who, despite being from other regions of Italy, stressed the importance of acquiring Tuscan as a spoken language.

as a written language elsewhere on the Italian peninsula, and only by cultivated people as it was the language of the Italian literary tradition. In the case of eighteenth-century Piedmont, the local vernacular — a vernacular that was lexically and phonetically very similar to French<sup>2</sup> — was widely spoken in everyday situations, although French was the language of cultivated conversations and high society. French was also considered easy to learn, so that many of the most widely read books were in French, whereas only the more traditional literary genres adopted Tuscan.<sup>3</sup> Vittorio Alfieri was born and raised in a bilingual, if not trilingual, environment consisting of vernacular, the French of his daily life as a cosmopolitan aristocrat, and the very poorly taught Tuscan of the schools in the kingdom of Sardinia.<sup>4</sup> Thus, of the three languages, Tuscan was certainly the most ‘artificial’ and unnatural for him to have spoken.

In this essay I suggest that Alfieri’s choice is not only representative of his identification with the Italian literary tradition but also of his recasting himself in a new role, that of a ‘man of Italy’ thus rejecting his Piedmontese origins. In particular, I argue that such a new identity is perceived as prestigious precisely because it is marked as being ‘foreign’.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, I show how the problem of language is embedded in Alfieri’s personal dilemma of identity.

An alternative interpretation to the one I present here is suggested by Antonio Porcu. Porcu maintains that Alfieri’s view on languages reflects the ideas of an anti-French movement in eighteenth-century Piedmont, which fought for the complete Italianization of the kingdom of Sardinia.<sup>6</sup> In fact, around 1750 King Vittorio Amedeo II was also promoting a policy of Italianization and centralization of his state.<sup>7</sup> In these same years, Piedmontese intellectuals were debating the problem of giving their country its own cultural characterization so as to remove the influence of France. Porcu connects Alfieri’s story to this cultural background, in particular to the ideas of Gian Francesco Galeani Napione. In his book entitled *Dell’uso e dei pregi della lingua italiana* [*On the Use and Qualities of the Italian Language*] Napione argues that Tuscan, as a cultivated language, was more ‘natural’ for

---

<sup>2</sup> Juergen von Stackelberg, ‘Galophilie, Gallomanie, Gallophobie. Anmerkungen zur Vita Vittorio Alfieris’, *Romanische Forschungen*, 105:3/4 (1993), 384-91 (p. 386).

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Porcu, ‘La Vita dell’Alfieri come vicenda linguistica’, *Lingua e stile. Trimestrale di linguistica e critica letteraria*, 11 (1976), 245-69, (p. 262).

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Ricuperati, ‘Intelletuali e istituzioni della cultura dello Stato sabaudo della seconda metà del Settecento’, in *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione. atti del convegno internazionale di studi in memoria di Carlo Palmisano, San Salvatore Monferrato, 22-24 settembre 1983, a cura di Giovanna Ioli* (Torino: 1985), pp. 3-15, (p. 5).

<sup>5</sup> Vittorio Alfieri, *Vita* (Milano: Garzanti, 1977), IV, I, p. 152. All translations are my own.

<sup>6</sup> Porcu, p. 262.

<sup>7</sup> Ricuperati, p. 7

Piedmont.<sup>8</sup> He also tried to prove that Piedmontese vernacular was very similar to Tuscan, conveniently overlooking the fact that for the people in Piedmont ‘Italian (Tuscan) was, amongst other dead languages, the most difficult to learn’.<sup>9</sup> According to Porcu, Alfieri returns to Tuscan, which he had learned in his early life and temporarily forgotten during the years of his debauched youth, as it was his true and natural language, a process which reflects Napione’s theory. Two passages of Napione’s book are invoked to justify this interpretation:

Di fatti quelli che abbandona l’uso della lingua propria per adoperarne una straniera, rinuncia in certo modo alla patria, prende la divisa, abbraccia i costumi e le idee e le opinioni di quella nazione di cui affetta l’idioma.<sup>10</sup>

[In fact, whoever abandons the use of his own language to speak a foreign one in a way gives up his home country to wear the uniform, embrace the customs and the ideas and the opinions of the nation whose language he adopts.]

E non v’ha che la nausea delle cose proprie, la tirannia della moda, l’affettazione, la svogliatezza, il poco amore, anzi l’avversione a’ costumi nazionali, che spinger ci possa a spogliare in questa parte l’indole nostra per vestirne una straniera, lasciano, a dir così, le armi appropriate alle nostre forze per impugnarne altre che d’impaccio ci riescano, mai di difesa.<sup>11</sup>

[And there is nothing more powerful than the disgust of one’s own things, the tyranny of fashion, laziness, lack of love, or, worse, the hostility to one’s national customs to push one to undress one’s own character to wear a foreign one. Those things provide the necessary weapons for our forces to embrace new ones that do not defend us but inconvenience us.]

According to Porcu, these passages describe the process by which Alfieri came to ‘forget’ Tuscan during his ‘eight years of uneducation’ and ‘the almost ten years of travels and debaucheries’, that is, his childhood and youth.<sup>12</sup> While I agree that Napione’s theories apply to the case of Alfieri, I argue that they describe a much later linguistic ‘conversion’, which took place when Alfieri abandoned ‘the use of his own language[s]’, Piedmontese and French,

---

<sup>8</sup> Gian Francesco Galeani Napione, *Dell’uso e dei pregi della lingua italiana* (Firenze: Magheri, 1840). All translations are my own.

<sup>9</sup> Porcu, p. 263.

<sup>10</sup> Galeani Napione, p. 62

<sup>11</sup> Galeani Napione, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Porcu, p. 267.

and gave up his own country to move to Tuscany, precisely because of a peculiar ‘disgust of his own things’ and his ‘hostility’ towards his national customs, which are recounted in the pages of his *Vita*.

One interesting observation concerns another aspect of the relationship between language and identity in Alfieri’s autobiography. Guido Santato notices that at the origins of Alfieri’s linguistic dislocation there is a deeper internal ‘scission of the I’,<sup>13</sup> that is also visible in many of his literary works. My analysis is much informed by Elio Gioanola’s psychoanalytical reading of Alfieri’s life and works in his essay ‘Alfieri: la melancolia e il doppio’.<sup>14</sup> Gioanola’s analysis reveals a twofold phenomenon: on the one hand, Alfieri projects an idealized self-image that embodies entirely desirable characteristics and on the other, he creates his negative ‘double’ with the opposite aspects. In fact, it is precisely this negative double that allows the idealized self to be completely ‘good’. This mechanism is perfectly enacted in the dynamics between hero and tyrant in many of Alfieri’s tragedies, where the latter is the negative image of the former. These observations shed new light on the relationship between language and identity. In fact, the same mechanism of projection is at work in Alfieri’s perception of Tuscan, on the one hand, as being the most beautiful of all languages, and of French and Piedmontese on the other, which he caricatures and rejects.

The narration of Alfieri’s linguistic journey can be divided into three phases. The first concerns his childhood and youth in Piedmont, where the use of Tuscan was very limited in spoken language. Alfieri describes Turin as an ‘amphibious city’, where people spoke ‘a barbaric jargon’ and where the use of Tuscan was a ‘*contrabbando*’ (a ‘transgression’), as shown in this episode concerning his uncle:

Mi compiaccio ora moltissimo del parlar di quel mio zio che sapea pur fare qualche cosa; ed ora soltanto ne conosco tutto il pregio. Ma quando io era in Accademia egli, benchè amorevolissimo per me, mi riusciva pure noiosetto anzi che no; e vedi, stortura di giudizio, e forza di false massime, la cosa che di esso mi seccava di più era il suo benedetto parlar toscano, ch’egli dal suo soggiorno in Roma in poi mai più non aveva voluto smettere; ancorchè il parlare italiano sia un vero *contrabbando* in Torino, città anfibia. Ma tanta però è la forza del bello e del vero, che la gente stessa che al principio quando il mio zio rimpatriò si burlava del di lui toscaneggiare, dopo alcun

---

<sup>13</sup> Guido Santato, *Lo stile e l’idea. L’elaborazione dei trattati alfieriani* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1995), p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Elio Gioanola, ‘Alfieri: la malinconia e il doppio’, *Vittorio Alfieri e la cultura piemontese fra illuminismo e rivoluzione. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi in memoria di Carlo Palmisano* (Torino:1985), pp. 131-144.

tempo avistisi poi ch'egli veramente parlava una lingua, ed essi smozzicavano un barbaro gergo, tutti poi a prova favellando con lui andavano anch'essi balbettando il loro toscano.<sup>15</sup>

[I very gladly now move on to talk about my uncle, who really knew a thing or two; and it is only now that I recognize his real value. But when I was in the Academy, even though he was very dear to me, he ended up being rather annoying, and, you see — failure of judgment and force of false maxims! — the thing that bothered me the most was his blessed use of the Tuscan dialect, which he, since his stay in Rome, had never again wanted to leave off, even though speaking Tuscan is a real transgression in Turin, that amphibious city. But such is the force of beauty and truth, that the very people who, when my uncle first moved there, used to mock his use of Tuscan, after a while becoming aware that he was really speaking a language, and that they were muttering a barbaric Creole, all of them from then onwards, when chatting with him, went along, even they, stuttering their own kind of Tuscan.]

The pages of Alfieri's autobiography which concern his years in the *Accademia* in Turin show how he learned Tuscan only as a written language and with great difficulty: 'Comunque accadesse dunque questa mia acquisizione, io m'ebbi un Ariosto. Lo andava leggendo qua e là senza metodo, e non intendeva neppur per metà quel ch'io leggeva.'<sup>16</sup>[However this acquisition of mine came about, then, I got myself an Ariosto. I went around reading it here and there unsystematically, and I didn't understand even half of what I was reading.]

The second phase of Alfieri's linguistic story coincides roughly with the third *Epoca* of his autobiography, where he narrates his restless travels through Europe. Those were the years when French became his dominant language, both because it was used to communicate in various countries and, more importantly, because the only books Alfieri read were in French:

Del resto, essendo io partito per quel viaggio di un anno senza pigliar meco altri libri che alcuni *Viaggi d'Italia*, e questi tutti in lingua francese, io mi avviava sempre più alla total perfezione della mia inoltrata barbarie. Coi compagni di viaggio si parlava sempre francese; onde quel pochino pochino ch'io andava pur pensando e combinando nel mio povero capino, era pure vestito di cenci francesi; e alcune letteruzze ch'io

---

<sup>15</sup> Alfieri, *Vita*, II, III, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, II, II, p. 29.

andava scrivendo, erano in francese; ed alcune memoriette ridicole ch'io andava schiccherando su questi miei viaggi, erano pure in francese.<sup>17</sup>

[Besides, having left for that journey for one year without bringing any books except a few *Italian Journeys*, all of which were in French, I was slowly advancing an already mature barbarity. My traveling companions always spoke French, so that the little thoughts that I was forming and combining in my poor little head were dressed in French rags; and some little letters I was writing were in French; and some ridiculous little memoirs I was putting down about my travels, they were in French too.]

If one reads in between the lines of Alfieri's ironic belittling of his writings, one sees that French is the language in which he used to think and in which he attempted his first literary expressions. In those years he also read important French authors such as Montaigne, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire and Helvetius. Alfieri chose to write his *Giornali* and his first two tragedies, *Filippo* and *Polinice* in French:

E in questa spiacevole e meschina lingua le aveva io stese, non già perche` io la sapessi, nè punto ci pretendessi, ma perché in quel gergo da me per quei cinque anni di viaggio esclusivamente parlato, e sentito, io mi veniva a spiegare un po' più, ed a tradire un po' meno il pensier mio [...].<sup>18</sup>

[And in this unpleasant and ugly language I wrote them [the two tragedies], not because I could master it well, never have I claimed so, but because in that jargon, that was the only language I had spoken and heard for the five years of my travels, I managed to explain myself a bit more and to betray my thoughts a bit less.]

The critical work of Ezio Raimondi on those first literary attempts has nonetheless shown that Alfieri's competence in French was quite high.<sup>19</sup> Alfieri the narrator rearranges his memories in order to project an idealized image of his linguistic switch. In other words, Alfieri wants to show how he moved from a mixture of two 'jargons', as he labels Piedmontese and French, none of which was spoken well, to the solid mastery of one 'true' language, Tuscan. In fact, Alfieri views his local vernacular as having no prestige, and French is regarded as being particularly hateful. It is clear that Alfieri's choice not to adopt French or Piedmontese was

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, III, I, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, I, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> Ezio Raimondi, 'La giovinezza letteraria dell'Alfieri. Dalla prosa francese ai primi esercizi italiani', *Memorie dell'Accademia delle Scienze dell'Istituto di Bologna*, 4-5 (1952-53), 319-344.

due to his personal distaste for the languages, rather than an inability to master them. In this phase of his journey Alfieri seems to despise everything that concerns Italy. For example, while traveling there he finds Parma and Bologna totally uninteresting<sup>20</sup> and although he notices the beauty of the local pronunciation in Tuscany, he decides to learn English:

Ed io sempre barbaramente andava balbettando l'inglese, ed avea chiusi e sordi gli orecchi al toscano. Esaminando poi la ragione di una sì stolta preferenza, ci trovai un falso amor proprio individuale, che a ciò mi spingeva senza ch'io pure me ne avvedessi. Avendo per più di due anni vissuto con Inglesi; sentendo per tutto magnificare la loro potenza e ricchezza; vedendone la grande influenza politica: e per l'altra parte vedendo l'Italia tutta esser morta; gl'Italiani divisi, deboli, avviliti e servi; io grandemente mi vergognava d'essere e parere italiano, e nulla delle cose loro non voleva nè praticar, nè sapere.<sup>21</sup>

[And I was always going around barbarically mumbling English, and my ears were closed and deaf to the Tuscan dialect. Afterwards, examining the reason for such a silly preference, I found in me a false individual self-love, which was driving me to this without my even becoming aware of it. Having lived for more than two years with English people; hearing their power and wealth exalted everywhere; seeing their vast political influence; and on the other hand seeing Italy quite dead; the Italians divided, weak, degraded and enslaved, I felt greatly ashamed of being and seeming Italian, and of their practices I wanted neither to do, nor to know, anything.]

What drives Alfieri to learn English is, on the one hand, his anger at seeing the Italians in a condition of inferiority, and on the other, his admiration for a country that everybody appears to consider 'superior'. However, such statements are to be read in the same context as the many rather critical and spiteful judgements on the ugliness of Piedmontese pronunciation, which we find in his *Vita*, in as much as those judgements illuminate more the frame of mind of Alfieri than the reality of Italy or the phonetics of Piedmontese vernacular. Alfieri seems to elect one element, in this case a language or a country, and make it the model of perfection, in comparison with which all the others are deficient. This is especially true for his aesthetic judgements on languages, because the phonetic characteristics of a language, as well as its 'beauty' or 'ugliness', emerge only when filtered by the phonetic system of a foreign speaker.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Vita*, III, I, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, III, I, pp. 63-64.

Alfieri considers the positive model as being embodied by the 'other', be it England when he views himself as a member of the Italian population or be it Tuscan when he compares it with his own languages, French and Piedmontese. In addition, the more Alfieri distances himself physically and culturally from Italy and from the Tuscan language the more these two are seen in a positive light. Alfieri himself informs us that he needed distance in order to appreciate the beauty of Tuscan:

Si partì per Livorno e per Siena; e in quest'ultima città, benchè il locale non me ne piacesse gran fatto, pure, tanta è la forza del bello e del vero, ch'io mi sentii quasichè un vivo raggio che mi rischiarava ad un tratto la mente, e una dolcissima lusinga agli orecchi e al cuore, nell'udire le più infime persone così soavemente e con tanta eleganza proprietà e brevità favellare. Con tutto ciò non vi stetti che un giorno; e il tempo della mia conversione letteraria e politica era ancora lontano assai; mi bisognava uscire lungamente d'Italia per conoscere ed apprezzare gli Italiani.<sup>22</sup>

[We left for Livorno and for Siena; and in this last city, though I did not like the place very much, such is the power of beauty and truth that I felt as if a bright ray were clearing my mind again and a sweet charm entering my ears and heart when I heard the most lowly people speak so sweetly and with such elegance, propriety, and brevity. Nevertheless, I only stayed there one day; and the time of my literary and political conversion was still quite far off; I needed to stay out of Italy for a long time to know and appreciate the Italians.]

In this passage Alfieri tells us that Tuscan had to become the language of the 'other' so that it could become his own language. Subsequently he embraced it with the enthusiasm of a neophyte, as we can detect from the terms 'conversion' and 'beauty and truth'. In fact, when he talks about his linguistic 'conversion' Alfieri makes use of religious terms and often refers to the time before such conversion as a time of 'deafness' and 'ignorance', as if he had been a pagan before encountering the Good News. Interestingly, the more he distances himself from Italy, the more Tuscan becomes a model of euphony, in comparison with which all the other languages sound unpleasant. For example, in Paris Alfieri criticizes the Alexandrine verse used in French drama: 'quel verseggiare a pariglia a pariglia di rime, e i versi a mezzi a mezzi, con tanta trivialità di modi e sì spiacevole nasalità di suoni'<sup>23</sup> ['those verses in rhymes of

---

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, III, I, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, III, IV, p. 78.



two and two and half and half, with such vulgar modes and ugly nasal sounds’]. Furthermore, in Denmark, while speaking Tuscan with the Neapolitan ambassador, Earl Catanti, Alfieri finds this language incredibly beautiful in comparison with the local one, Danish:

Mi dilettaua molto il parlare e la pronunzia toscana, massimamente paragonandola col piagnisteo nasale e gutturale del dialetto danese che mi toccava di udire per forza, ma senza comprenderlo, la Dio grazia.<sup>24</sup>

[I liked very much the Tuscan language and its pronunciation, especially if I compared it with the nasal and guttural whine of Danish that I was forced to hear, thank God, without understanding it .]

It is important to remark that all of Alfieri’s linguistic judgments invariably concern the phonetic aspect of a language rather than the lexical one. This is mainly because it is precisely the phonetics that carry an aesthetic or affective connotation, so that even amongst speakers of the same language tiny variations of pronunciation and accent may conjure up either appreciation or rejection. Interestingly, while Alfieri progressively idealizes Tuscan, he simultaneously purges from his own pronunciation of Piedmontese precisely those phonetic elements that distinguish it from the dialects of central Italy. In other words, the encounter with the ‘other’ language estranges him from his own, which he regards with sarcasm and contempt:

Io malamente mi spiegava col prefato conte Catanti, quanto alla proprietà dei termini, alla brevità e alla efficacia delle frasi che è somma nei Toscani; ma quanto alla pronunzia di quelle mie parole barbare italianizzate, ell’era bastanta pura e toscana; stante che io deridendo sempre tutte le altre pronunzie italiane, che veramente mi offendevano l’udito, mi era avvezzo a pronunziare quanto meglio poteva e la *u* e la *z*, *gi* e *ci* e ogni altra toscanità.<sup>25</sup>

[With the aforementioned Earl Catanti I would speak badly, as for the appropriateness of terms, brevity and the efficiency of phrasing which is consummate among Tuscans; but as for the pronunciation of those Italianized barbaric words of mine, that was pure enough and Tuscan; this was because in making fun of all other Italian accents, that really offended my hearing, I had grown accustomed to pronouncing as best I could

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, III, VIII, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, III, IV, p. 96.

the *u* and the *z*, *g* and *c* and every other distinctly Tuscan sound.]

Earlier in the text, while narrating his first stay in Florence, Alfieri states:

Con tutto ciò io mi ero subito ripurgata la pronunzia di quel nostro orribile *u* lombardo o francese, che sempre mi era spiaciuto moltissimo per quella sua magra articolazione, e per quella boccuccia che fanno le labbra di chi lo pronuncia, somiglianti in quell'atto moltissimo alle scimmie, allorchè favellano. E ancora adesso, benchè di codesto *u*, da cinque o più anni ch'io sto in Francia ne abbia pieni e foderati gli orecchi, pure egli mi fa ridere ogni volta che ci bado...<sup>26</sup>

[Nevertheless, I had immediately purged my pronunciation from that horrible Lombard [Northern Italian] or French *u* of ours, which has always displeased me greatly because of its narrow articulation, for the funny little mouth that the lips of whoever pronounces it make, looking very similar in that act to monkeys, when they speak. And even now, although of that *u*, from the five or more years that I have been in France, I have had my ears stuffed full, nonetheless it makes me laugh every time that I come across it...]

Alfieri perceives Piedmontese and French as being phonetically similar. Thus, when he detaches himself from French he also detaches himself from the phonetic system he was accustomed to. Moreover, when Alfieri makes fun of the French pronunciation, it is he himself whom he is looking at, as though through a transforming and rather deforming mirror. In comparison, when describing Tuscan he only underlines how sweet and elegant it sounds.

The third phase in Alfieri's linguistic voyage narrates his tenacious effort to eradicate his 'amphibious' linguistic condition in order to become monolingual and to acquire Tuscan. Thus, the more natural French became to him the more 'unnatural' was his attempt to become a 'man of Italy'.<sup>27</sup> The vocabulary in these pages of Alfieri's autobiography describes the acquisition of Tuscan by referring to the semantics of 'dressing and undressing' and through the frequent use of the prefixes '*s*', that in Italian indicate separation, see for example 'spensare', 'spiemontizzarsi', 'sfuggire', and '*ri*', 'to do something anew', and 'to start again from the beginning', see 'ristudiare', 'ricompitare', 'ricollocare', 'rifare' and 'rivestire'.

---

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, III, I, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup>See note 5 above.

Questi furono i miei santi protettori nella feroce e continua battaglia in cui mi convenne passare ben tutto il primo anno della mia vita letteraria, di sempre dar la caccia alle parole francesi, di spogliare per così dire le mie idee per rivestirle di nuovo sotto altro aspetto, di riunire insomma nello stesso punto lo studio di un uomo maturissimo con quello di un ragazzo delle prime scuole.<sup>28</sup>

[These were my guardian angels in the fierce and continuous battle in which I had to spend the whole of the first year of my literary life, always to be chasing away French words, always trying, in a manner of speaking, to strip my ideas in order to clothe them anew under another aspect, to reunite, that is, the studies of a man of advanced maturity with those of a boy at elementary school.]

In other words, to ‘convert’ to a new language implies the death of the old self and the rebirth of a new one, who has to repeat the process of language acquisition that occurs in childhood. Moreover Alfieri repeatedly describes this effort as being tremendous. To adopt Tuscan means to adopt a new identity (the ‘man of Italy’ and the writer) and to force a mask upon oneself. Interestingly, the linguistic and literary conversion coincides with two other important ‘dislocations’, a geographical as well as a political one. Firstly, Alfieri decides to expatriate himself from the kingdom of Sardinia and to reside permanently in Tuscany. Secondly, he gives up the revenue derived from his aristocratic title in order to make his living as a writer.

I can now draw the following conclusions. By choosing Tuscan, Alfieri does not return to his true origins, neither does he follow the ideas of the anti-French movements of his time, but he adopts the language of the persona whom he wants to be, that is the writer who belongs to the illustrious literary tradition of Italy. Furthermore, such a linguistic choice reflects Alfieri’s inner dichotomy between his self, which he perceives as being inadequate, and the ‘other’, which is idealized, as shown by Gioanola. Devoting himself to literature, with an eye on eternal glory, Alfieri creates another self who lives in the atemporal dimension of artistic creation and who writes in the language of the illustrious Italian literary tradition. Alfieri expends tremendous effort to free his new identity from the chains of the old self — the negative persona who speaks French and Piedmontese, and who is an aristocrat of the Sabaudian kingdom. As Santato notices, ‘to achieve his own transcendence Alfieri must exist, that is, locate himself out of himself. To live becomes to live for death.’<sup>29</sup> Adopting a

---

<sup>28</sup> *Vita*, IV, I, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Santato, p. 38.

foreign language and the language of literature *par excellence* is for Alfieri one of the ways of distancing himself from the ghost of his ‘double’, whose way of speaking is grotesquely caricatured. Moreover, from Alfieri’s perspective, speaking two languages equals ‘speaking no language at all’ and having no identity.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, monolingualism is the sign of a solid self-image and of a definite identity.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Vita*, II, X, p. 57.

# Different Voices? Film and Text or Film as Text: Considering the Process of Film Adaptation from the Perspective of Discourse

Justine Kemlo

Université Libre de Bruxelles

## *Abstract*

*Adaptation has always held an ambiguous creative position, caught between an original work of art and its subjective re-shaping in another, sometimes vividly different, form. Understanding the phenomenon of adaptation through the analysis of its objects when the 'matters of expression' (Hjelmslev's term) in which they are articulated differ is a problematic, yet underemphasized, issue.*

*In order to fathom the mechanisms of the procedure of adaptation and thus comprehend and possibly redefine the balance of power between the elements present, one must find a methodological framework that supports and allows correlations and therefore contrast. It is only in this fashion that conclusive findings on the nature of adaptation as a process can be gained from observation of adaptations as products.*

*It is my contention that discursive theories, despite obvious but ultimately superficial hindrances such as the variation in semiotic systems, are an adequate model for this type of exploration. The multimodal systemic-functional framework that I eventually propose as most appropriate will first be contrasted against previous approaches (especially traditional theories of discourse analysis and semiotic film theories). This will provide a methodological backdrop against which this framework may be appraised while simultaneously specifying its terms.*

*The focus of the investigation conducted here is to reconsider the definitions of discourse and text, to contemplate whether and where film would fit within these definitions and how it could be used to study adaptation.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Among creative processes, adaptation has always held an ambiguous position, caught between an original work of art and its subjective reshaping in another, sometimes vividly

different, form. This transformation might be considered invasive, claiming for itself, albeit productively, the essence of another's creation. It is a process which has received extensive interest over the last decades and whose span has varied widely. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, has acknowledged the difficulty of addressing the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation (Hutcheon 2006). The definition which she proposes considers adaptation as a product *and* as a process and examines the bi-directional movements between three modes of engagement: telling, showing and interacting. Within the restricted scope of this paper 'adaptation' will designate only the adaptation of literary texts to film, probably the most prolific of all adaptive domains, at least from a critical perspective. It is also worth pointing out that my approach at this stage will be primarily theoretical and exploratory, aiming at identifying and defining a system which can subsequently be illustrated or extended to other more open perceptions of adaptation.

The research done in the field of adaptation from novels to film has tended to focus on issues such as narration, perspective, quantitative and qualitative changes (Carcaud-Macaire & Clerc 2004; Cattrysse 1992; Jost 1987; Peters 1980). But one type of approach seems to have been underemphasized, namely the problematic issue of how to understand the phenomenon of adaptation through the analysis of its objects when the semiotic systems in which they are articulated differ.

In order to fathom the mechanisms of the procedure of adaptation and thus comprehend and possibly redefine the balance of power between the elements present, a methodological framework is needed. It should be flexible enough to allow correlations and therefore contrast between the examined objects. It is only in this fashion that conclusive findings on the nature of adaptation as a process can be gained from observation of adaptations as products. A film cannot be effectively compared to the novel it has been adapted from unless we acknowledge the essential differences at the core of the two systems, all the while finding a way to transcend them. To use Hutcheon's terms, *telling* does not function like *showing* does; but to relate what has been *told* to what has been *shown* is feasible if we find a way of articulating divergences and convergences.

To my knowledge, theories of discourse have seldom been used in the study of adaptation, literary or otherwise. It is my contention that these theories are an adequate — maybe the most adequate — model for this type of exploration, despite obvious but ultimately superficial hindrances such as the variation in semiotic systems. Discursive theories (and more precisely systemic-functional multimodal discourse, as developed below) provide us with a frame and terminology which allow us to comment relevantly on the parallels to be

drawn between text and film using a grounded, less impressionistic model than before. To date, much of the research dealing with adaptation of novels to film has focused on a literary and often on a narrative perspective. Moreover, although some authors have pointed out the need to distinguish between what is directly transferable and what must necessarily be adapted, between the enunciated and the enunciation (McFarlane 1996), no system seems to have emerged that would show us how to make these distinctions, account for them or indeed label them. The discursive model which I propose could bring a new perspective to these matters, systematize them and also open the path to a wide range of implementations, from the specific (novel to film) to the more general (adaptation understood more broadly). This article stops short of illustrating this model. It focuses instead on the process of how exploration of previous theories led up to its adoption and the possibilities it offers at a further stage. What follows is then a — necessarily selective — overview of how adaptation, and more precisely the contrast between adapted literary texts and the resulting adaptations in the form of film-texts (a term which will be further specified and queried below) has been examined by different academic disciplines; from traditional theories of discourse analysis to more recent ones, integrating paths taken by film theoreticians along the way. Within the vast area of film theory, it is especially film semioticians to whom I will refer, since their interest in the essence of the filmic text parallels my endeavour to define and delineate film texts and view them alongside more traditional types of text. This overview will provide a methodological backdrop against which the framework that I eventually propose as most appropriate may be appraised while simultaneously specifying its terms.

By examining features and using theories traditionally pertaining to the field of linguistics at large and more particularly to discourse analysis, and applying them to both literature *and* film, I hope to define elements which, while retaining idiosyncratic features, share distinctive characteristics that may later be contrasted. The scope of my analysis will thus not be restrictively lexico-grammatical but will rather bear on wider concepts such as discourse representation or the notion of texture itself. The first step to take in this direction, and the focus of the investigation conducted here, is precisely to reconsider the definitions of discourse and text, and to contemplate whether and where film would fit within these definitions. Is there a film voice? If so, how can it be characterized, how can it be deconstructed? Does it make sense to do so? Is it different from what is traditionally understood as *text*? When comparing text and film, are we faced with different voices or with variations of one and the same voice?

## 2 FILM(S) AND TEXT(S) OR FILM-TEXTS

Traditional discourse analysis (Jaworski & Coupland 1999; Schiffrin 1994; Brown & Yule 1983) has generally held a rather conventional view of discourse as the analysis of language in use. Some definitions have extended discourse to language beyond use. The object of discourse analysis however, is commonly regarded as consisting of texts, although precise definition of what constitutes text remains elusive. The approach to these texts has, until recently, been overwhelmingly focused on language, disregarding other semiotic systems, meaning-making systems that function beyond or parallel to language or in combination with it. Although the existence of such systems has been posited through the acknowledgment of multimodal texts (Jaworski & Coupland 1999), that is, texts which make use of more than one semiotic system, they have rarely been subjected to analysis due to the metalinguistic obstacles that such an analysis would entail. Thus discourse analysis was perceived as monomodal, the focus being primarily on the already rich perspectives offered by language-centred approaches. This model, with its overriding emphasis on language, left little leeway to consider film as a textual object. We will see below how that focus has recently shifted to accommodate other views on discourse and other systems or texts which enact it.

Before developing these, it is worthwhile taking a detour through semiotic film theories to investigate how the notion of film and ‘film-texts’ has been defined there. Of particular relevance is the fact that research conducted in this field has stemmed from linguistics, extending the theorization of meaning-making language to other semiotic systems.

The founder and inspirational figure of this movement was Christian Metz. Metz’s enquiries into film as language are developed at the level of Saussure’s *langue* rather than exemplified through instances of *parole*. However, his writings frequently hint at the possibility not only of regarding films as textual objects but also of deconstructing, albeit temporarily, these texts into different strata and observing these separately.

In the work which may be considered as the cornerstone of his theory, *Langage et Cinéma* (1977), Metz draws the outlines of a system which he hopes could lay the foundation for a theoretical understanding of filmic processes both from the producer’s and the recipient’s point of view. Defining films as texts is paramount to his approach:

Le seul principe de pertinence susceptible de définir actuellement la sémiologie du film est [...] la volonté de traiter les films comme des *textes*, comme des unités de discours, en s’obligeant par là à rechercher les différents



*systèmes* (qu'ils soient ou non des codes) qui viennent informer ces textes et s'impliciter en eux. Si on déclare que la sémiologie étudie la *forme* des films, ce doit être sans oublier que la forme n'est pas ce qui s'oppose au contenu, et qu'il existe une forme du contenu, tout aussi importante que la forme du signifiant.<sup>1</sup> (1977: 14)

Using Hjelmslev's (1970) theory of the 'matter of expression', he sees these texts as whole signifying objects while also acknowledging the possibility of subdividing them into separate components, labelled as 'sensorial supports'. They are of five kinds: image, musical sound, phonetic sound (in words), noise and writing. Right from the outset, we can see how two of these, words and writing, can comfortably be accommodated within a discursive framework since they allow direct linguistic observation. Image can also prove linguistically relevant insofar as it provides paralinguistic information to supplement other analyses. In a film-text the visual element is a given which allows us to consider dimensions which, in written text, are regrettably lost or at best are typically confined to descriptive comments. Indeed, in the case of adaptations, many essential linguistic clues (accent, prosodic features such as rhythm, intonation, etc.) or extra-linguistic ones (semiotics, proxemics, gestures) can be introduced, regardless of whether they appear — explicitly or otherwise — in the original text.

The fact that Metz chooses to consider these supports globally as one product does not preclude their separate analysis. It is, however, essential never to lose perspective of the whole underlying them. Metz himself hinted at the possibility:

Ce n'est pas parce qu'un message est visuel que tous ses codes le sont; et ce n'est pas parce qu'un code se manifeste dans des messages visuels qu'il ne se manifeste pas aussi ailleurs. Les 'langages' visuels entretiennent avec les autres des liens systématiques qui sont multiples et complexes, et on ne gagne rien à opposer le 'verbal' et le 'visuel' comme deux grands blocs dont chacun

---

<sup>1</sup> The only relevant principle which is capable of defining film semiology today [...] is the will to treat films as *texts*, as unities of discourse, thereby forcing us to research the different *systems* (whether or not these are codes) which inform these texts and become implicit through them. If we declare that semiology studies the *form* of films, we must not forget that form is not opposed to content, and that there is a form of content, just as important as the form of the signifier. (All translations in this paper are by the author).

serait homogène, massif et sans faille, et qui entretiendraient l'un avec l'autre des rapports logiques de pure extériorité.<sup>2</sup> (1977: 24)

Metz uses the label of 'pluri-code' to describe the heterogeneous nature of film which is not contrived but simply a condition for its existence. Other authors have also tackled this issue: Cattrysse (1992) speaks of a 'composite filmic discourse', made up of different sensory series which take place simultaneously; whereas Gardies (1987) considers any media message, film included, as the narrow and interdependent combination of concomitant languages.

What all these definitions have in common is the apparent contradiction between the inextricability of different codes, modes and/or voices and the simultaneous acknowledgment of the composite nature and therefore possible separation of the constitutive elements of this discourse. This conundrum at the core of what constitutes a film-text is proving hard to resolve: although it is implicitly understood and acknowledged, it is yet to be coherently articulated.

It is worth mentioning that the flexibility of Metz's position, which perceived the verbal and the visual as two interacting rather than conflicting forces, has often been disregarded, or worse misunderstood, even by his followers. Later semioticians have indeed tended to consider language and image as two blocks in contrast with each other and therefore have often construed parallels between them as impossible or irrelevant. Among them, Ropars-Wuilleumier has this to say:

Un film n'est pas un texte – est-il encore temps de l'avouer? [...] Entre la littérature et le cinéma, l'assimilation provisoire présuppose un constat de différence, sensible, technique, voire éthique. Mais pas plus que le cinéma ne s'accomplit en soi, loin des signes de sa genèse, pas d'avantage la littérature ne se rend à elle-même, hors le détour d'un reflet où déchiffrer son visage, fût-ce pour le voir se briser. L'écriture, ce facteur ambigu si souvent invoqué, fraye un passage latéral, ménageant du film au texte, du texte au film, les canaux d'une liaison qui, en chaque cas, œuvre à la disjonction du terme joint.<sup>3</sup> (1990: 225)

---

<sup>2</sup> The fact that a message is visual does not mean that all its codes are; and the fact that a code appears in the guise of visual messages does not mean that it doesn't also manifest itself in other forms. Visual 'languages' maintain multiple and complex systematic links to other languages, and nothing can be gained by opposing the 'verbal' and the 'visual' as two great blocks, homogeneous, solid, without faultlines and which, in terms of logic, maintain with each other only purely exterior links.

<sup>3</sup> A film is not a text – can we still admit it? [...] Between literature and film, temporary assimilation presupposes acknowledging an appreciable, technical or even ethical difference. But, just as cinema is not

Even as he steered clear of exemplification, Metz was at once more tolerant and more cautious, conceding the layering and divisibility of filmic ‘sensorial supports’, all the while keeping in mind that it is the film itself which constitutes a text and that any separate analysis (linguistic, for instance) must eventually be re-projected onto a more global canvas. As Jost (1987) points out, a film is never an addition (images + words and sound) but rather a product or result, a double narrative whose two modes of expression are ultimately bound to one another. The use of ‘double’ narrative rather than ‘multiple’, which would seem more appropriate, is Jost’s own.

In the case of adaptation, film theorists have more readily resorted to linguistic frameworks by exploring the parallels that could be drawn with other forms of transfer such as translation. Carcaud-Macaire and Clerc (but also Cattrysse 1992; Helbo 1997), tentatively hinted at this possibility:

D’autre part, on peut considérer que le problème de l’adaptation est un aspect de celui de la traduction. Il permet de mieux comprendre à quel point le langage véhicule une analyse de la réalité qui lui est spécifique et qui diffère sensiblement de celle qui est véhiculée par l’image [...] La non-coïncidence des éléments transposés et le constat général de ‘trahison’ par l’image conduisent à poser la question du nouveau découpage, concurrentiel à celui de la langue et inhérent à l’instrumentation technique, par lequel passe l’adaptation.<sup>4</sup> (2004: 13)

Along the same lines, Cattrysse (1992) attempted to develop a ‘polysystem’ that would accommodate all adaptations from both a synchronic and diachronic perspective. He grounds his theory in existing polysystemic models of translation such as that of Toury (1986):

Translating is an act (or a process) which is performed (or occurs) over and across systemic borders. In the widest of its possible senses it is a series of

---

realised in isolation, far from the signs of its genesis, so literature cannot return to itself without observing, in a roundabout way, the reflection of its face even if it is to find it shattered. Writing, that ambiguous yet frequently cited factor, clears a lateral path arranging, from film to text, and text to film, the channels of a connection which, in each case, works to disconnect the common terms.

<sup>4</sup> The issue of adaptation can be considered as an aspect of the issue of translation. This allows us to understand more clearly to what extent language conveys an analysis of reality which is specifically its own and which is appreciably different from that which image conveys [...] The non-coincidence of the transposed elements and the general assessment of the image as ‘betrayal’ may lead us to wonder about the new division which adaptation supposes, at once competing with language and inherent to technical instrumentation.

operations, or procedures, whereby one semiotic entity, which is a (functional) constituent (element) of a certain cultural (sub)system, is transformed into another semiotic entity, which forms at least a potential element of another cultural (sub)system, providing that some informational core is retained ‘invariant under transformation’, and on its basis a relationship known as ‘equivalence’ is established between the resultant and initial entities. (1986: 1112-13)

For analogies to be drawn between the two processes (translation and adaptation), considering films as texts, as realised discourse(s), is a basic prerequisite. The discrepancy between an *intrasemiotic* process and an *intersemiotic* one nonetheless continues to hinder comparison and, more particularly, metalinguistic description of this comparison. The global view which still prevails is that of a film-text as an intertwined system of layers which it is problematic to unravel.

### 3 MULTIMODALITY: A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL VIEW

Very recently however, some linguists have begun to broach the subject of multimodal discourse and to analyse texts under a newfound perspective.

Taking Halliday’s (1973; 1978; 2004 [1985, 1994]) systemic functional grammar as a starting point, they have sought to apply his instruments to other systems of meaning that are not necessarily, or only partially, linguistic in scope. Thus, subscribing to Halliday’s organisation of meaning into three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) which can be adapted to suit different modes (see for instance O’Toole 1994), they have sought to develop ‘grammars’ which are no longer lexico-grammatical but still reveal a system-structure cycle of paradigmatic choices built into a congruent whole which can in turn be decomposed along a rank scale.

These theories started by extending the conception of language as an isolated phenomenon to include other semiotic, meaning-making, resources. This new outlook initially focused mainly on developing ‘grammars’ of visual design (O’Toole 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]), but was soon widened to comprise other modes. It went as far as including instances of everyday practices of ‘ordinary’ humans known as ‘practically lived texts’ (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). It has also spawned a variety of approaches, from

developing theoretical models (Norris 2004; Lim Fei 2004; O'Toole 2004), to researching systems and types beyond the text or multimodal text analysis proper.

Kress and van Leeuwen's definition of what constitutes multimodality illustrates the openness of this approach, especially in contrast with traditional monomodal discourse analysis:

The traditional linguistic account is one in which *meaning is made once*, so to speak. By contrast, we see the multimodal resources which are available in a culture used to make meanings in any and every sign, at any level, and in any mode. Where traditional linguistics had defined language as a system that worked through *double articulation*, where a message was an articulation as a form and as a meaning, we see multimodal texts as making meaning in multiple articulations. (2001: 4)

This model enables one to view films as composite multimodal *texts*, a perspective which can finally be posited unproblematically within this framework.

Authors who have explored the medium of film within this perspective (Baldry 2004; O'Halloran 2004; Iedema 2001) have sought to deal with the added dimension of dynamicity in film-texts, as opposed, for instance, to multimodal print texts. Over and above the co-deployment of selections within different semiotic meaning-making resources, meaning is made through the temporal and spatial unfolding of these resources which are perceived as a flux rather than an addition of instances (Baldry 2004; Baldry & Thibault 2006; O'Halloran 2008). Baldry (2004) addresses this issue by attempting to develop a new software system that could simultaneously encode the multiple dimensions of film-texts. This system, known as MCA (Multimodal Corpus Authoring) would allow a shift from an in-vitro multimodal transcription, where film is divided into still frames which can be metafunctionally annotated, to an in-vivo transcription where film can be retrieved in its dynamic format and simultaneously contrasted within a relational database. A notable advantage of MCA, as pointed out by the developers, is its ability to contrast multimodal texts, or dimensions of these, with texts previously thought of as monomodal, and to do so through the use of a concordancer. Thus metafunctionally based choices can be analysed both intrasemiotically and intersemiotically. It seems to solve many of the issues previously raised and thus to prove a useful tool with which to study adaptation. It could allow us, for instance, to take a scene from an original novel and compare it with its filmic equivalent. Through a system of

annotation and encoding, we could ascribe different meanings to different elements at play and the concordancer would then allow us to observe convergence and divergence between these meanings. This has already been done solely within the filmic text (Baldry 2004) and by extension a similar program could be used to amalgamate dimensions from different texts, filmic or not. To use a more concrete example, MCA could allow us to correlate systematically the use of a narrative device in a novel (first person narration, for instance) with the use of equivalent (or non-equivalent) filmic devices (different types of shot, focal distances, voice-over, and so on). Unfortunately, this software is still under (re)development. However, the principles which it posits, that is, the use of a systemic-functional terminology and model, may be equally applied to in-vitro transcriptions and therefore provide us with the analytical framework which was keenly sought but which had so far proved elusive. At present, a major research initiative is underway in the Multimodal Analysis Lab in Singapore to develop new approaches to systemic-functional multimodal analysis of film texts using interactive digital media, incorporating computer science approaches into multimodal analysis (O'Halloran 2008).

Using a systemic-functional framework opens the path to a comparative examination where texts, both in their traditional linguistic form and as film-texts, can be contrasted along the same metafunctional guidelines, even when the systems or semiotic resources which enact them are at variance.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Thus, in different ways and to different extents, both discourse analysis, especially multimodal discourse, and semiotic theories of film collude in strengthening our understanding of film(s) as text(s). The variation in semiotic systems is not *per se* an obstacle to understanding the processes underlying film adaptation if we accept a system of analysis which is target-oriented. Acknowledging the composite nature of this/these discourse(s) allows us to view and analyse its elements separately, as long as we heed the fact that it is the film itself which constitutes a text and that any specific observations (at any rank within a systemic-functional framework, for instance) must eventually be contemplated against the *Gestalt* of the text. Films can then be deconstructed into their constitutive elements (sensorial supports, semiotic systems) and these can offer ground for meaningful comparison with other, more traditional, types of text. In other words, the voice of a film is not one voice but a

polyphony of voices, whose melody is heard simultaneously but whose individual tracks can be isolated and compared to others, thus helping us reach a deeper understanding of the tune.

- Baldry, Anthony. 2004. 'Phase and Transition, Type and Instance: Patterns in Media Texts as Seen through a Multimodal Concordancer,' in O'Halloran (2004b): 83-108
- Brown, G. & G. Yule. 1983. *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Carcaud-Macaire, Monique & Marie-Jeanne Clerc. 2004. *L'Adaptation cinématographique et littéraire* (Paris: Klincksieck)
- Cattrysse, Patrick. 1992. *Pour une théorie de l'adaptation filmique* (Berne: Peter Lang)
- Gardies, René. 1987. *Paroles aux images: D'un média à l'autre* (Paris: Colin)
- Genette, Gérard. 1982. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil)
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1973. *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (London: Arnold)
- 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Arnold)
- 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold)
- Helbo, André. 1997. *L'adaptation du théâtre au cinéma* (Paris: Masson and Colin)
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1970. *Language: An Introduction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press)
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge)
- Iedema, R. 2001. 'Analysing Film and Television: A Social Semiotic Account of *Hospital: An Unhealthy Business*,' in *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, ed. by T. van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (London: Sage), 183-204
- Jaworski, Adam & Nicolas Coupland (eds). 1999. *The Discourse Reader* (London: Routledge)
- Jost, François. 1987. *L'Oeil caméra: Entre film et roman* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon)
- Kress, Gunther & Theo van Leeuwen. 2001. *Multimodal Discourse* (London: Arnold)
- 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge)
- Lim Fei, V. 2004. 'Developing an Integrative Multi-Semiotic Model,' in O'Halloran (2004b): 220-46
- McFarlane, Brian. 1996. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Metz, Christian. 1977. *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Albatros)
- Norris, Sigrid. 2004. 'Multimodal Discourse Analysis: A Conceptual Framework,' in *Discourse and Technology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, ed. by P. Levine & R. Scollon (Washington: Georgetown University Press), 101-15
- O'Halloran, Kay. 2004a. 'Visual Semiosis in Film,' in *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, (see O'Halloran), 109-30
- 2009. 'Multimodal Analysis and Digital Technology,' in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Multimodality: Theory and Practice*, ed. by A. Baldry & E. Montagna (Campobasso: Palladino), n.p.
- O'Halloran, Kay, ed. 2004b. *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic-Functional Perspectives* (London: Continuum)
- O'Toole, Michael. 1994. *The Language of Displayed Art* (London: Leicester University Press)
- 2004. 'Opera Ludentes: The Sydney Opera House at Work and Play,' in O'Halloran (2004b): 11-27
- Peters, J. M. 1980. *Van woord naar beeld: De vertaling van romans in film* (Muiderberg: Countinho)
- Ropars-Wuilleumier, Marie-Claire. 1990. *Écraniques: Le film du texte* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille)
- Schiffrin, Deborah. 1994. *Approaches to Discourse* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Toury, Gideon. 1986. 'Translation: A Cultural-Semiotic Perspective,' in *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, ed. by T. A. Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter), 1111-24



## Language and Liminality in the Italian Section of Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*

Ian McHugh

University of Sussex

### *Abstract*

*This paper looks at systems of language (linguistic and filmic) in the twelve-minute Italian section of Gus Van Sant's My Own Private Idaho (1993), a short but notable interlude to the narrative, which serves as a liminal space through which the two central characters pass, to different ends. The paper employs poststructuralist theory, psychoanalysis, and film theory to develop a reading of this liminality as subject to an economy of inclusive and exclusive systems of meaning. It describes the constitution of this liminal space through the gaps and fissures between these parallel systems, and suggests that a successful negotiation of these systems appears to allow a transition across the liminal space, whereas an unsuccessful transition effects a displacement. The film's two central characters offer contrasting views of such successful and unsuccessful transitions. The character of Scott actively seeks displacement and achieves effortless transitions across systems of meaning. In contrast, the character of Mike (who suffers from narcolepsy, which impacts upon his subjectivity) desperately searches for a fixed status and suffers perpetual displacement. This paper draws on a chapter from my doctoral thesis, which looks at representations of liminal states of consciousness and presupposes radical shifts in subjectivity in proximity to the sites of sleeping and waking, with ramifications for identity and the perception of reality.*

The latter half of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1993) features a twelve-minute section in which the two central characters, Mike and Scott, travel to Italy in search of Mike's mother, Sharon.<sup>1</sup> This is notable as the only part of the film located away from the Pacific

---

<sup>1</sup> *My Own Private Idaho*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (New Line Cinema, 1993).

Northwest – the triad of Idaho, Seattle, and Portland identified with brightly coloured title cards – and because it is so geographically and tonally distant from the rest of the film. Something of this distance, and difference, engenders a liminal space for both characters, and acts as a catalyst for change in their relationship.

Much has been written of Van Sant's appropriation of Shakespeare in the structure and language of the film, and of the film's considerable influence in Queer cinema.<sup>2</sup> Fewer critics have focused on the protagonist's narcolepsy or the theme of liminality.<sup>3</sup> This paper is part of a larger project considering representation of liminal states of consciousness in film and literature and as such *My Own Private Idaho* is a vital text, for the narcolepsy of its protagonist Mike Waters and for Van Sant's kaleidoscopic assemblage of filmic grammar. While neither this paper, nor the project as a whole, aims to take into account the considerable breadth of Van Sant's work or site it within a larger analysis of either Shakespeare or Queer cinema, it is of note that the opposing concepts of transience and home, key to an analysis of liminality, are prominent in much of Van Sant's work. In *My Own Private Idaho*, Mike is transient and yearns for home (the 'Private Idaho' of the title), while his quest to find his mother is one of the film's central, if slender, narrative threads. *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (an adaptation of Tom Robbins' 1976 novel) offers a happier counterpart to Mike: blessed with abnormally large thumbs, protagonist Sissy Hankshaw is a perpetual hitchhiker who finds contentment in transience.<sup>4</sup> In *Gerry*, two friends get lost while hiking and are driven mad, stranded in the wilderness, unable to find their way home.<sup>5</sup> Blake, the Kurt Cobain-like protagonist of *Last Days*, remains in his mansion for most of the film, though this is a corrupted version of home, lacking peace, intruded upon by hangers-on and visitors.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, he commits suicide in an outhouse, a threshold space, both inside and out.

For Mike in *My Own Private Idaho*, it is the desire to find his mother – and thus his roots and a home – which motivates his transit. He tracks her first to an Idaho hotel, and then

---

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the film and Shakespeare, see Hugh H. Davis, 'Shakespeare, He's in the Alley: *My Own Private Idaho* and Shakespeare in the Streets', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 29.2 (2001), 116-21; Linda Charnes, 'Henry IV', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48.5 (1997), 647; Lisa S. Starks, and Courtney Lehmann, *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002). For discussion of the film and Queer cinema, see Patrick Crowe, 'No Place Like Home: Homelessness, Identity and Sexuality in American Queer Cinema', *Cineaction*, 35 (1994), 66-72; James Morrison, 'Still New, Still Queer, Still Cinema?', *GLQ*, 12.1 (2006), 135-146; David Roman, 'Shakespeare in Portland: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Homoneurotics, and Boy Actors', *Genders*, 20 (1994), 311-33.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Benjo, 'Narcolepsie', *Vertigo*, 11.12 (1994), 146; Paul Arthur, and Naomi C. Liebler, 'Kings of the Road: *My Own Private Idaho* and the Traversal of Welles, Shakespeare, and Liminality', *Post Script*, 17.2 (1998), 26-38.

<sup>4</sup> *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (New Line Cinema, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> *Gerry*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (Altera Films, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> *Last Days*. Dir. Gus Van Sant (HBO Films, 2005).

on to a rural Italian smallholding. Here Scott meets a young woman, the farmer's niece Carmella, who informs him Sharon left the farm long ago. Mike is distraught and keen to return to America as soon as possible; Scott, however, begins a relationship with Carmella, and they return to America together, while Mike returns to Rome. As in Portland, he works the streets as a prostitute, and some time later returns to America.

For both Scott and Mike, Italy is a transitional place. Van Sant's screenplay draws strongly on *Henry IV*, with Scott as Prince Hal, for whom the trip might be seen as a rite of passage: he departs as Hal and returns as Henry. Mike's transition is marked by an increment of absence: when he returns he is homeless, as before, though now he is also without Scott, his protector and love object. Moreover, his quest to find his mother has reached an inconclusive end: he is rootless and will remain so, achieving a perpetual, unhappy, liminality.

Language is key to the liminality that both characters experience, and to the change it effects, both in the linguistic space between English and Italian, and in the diverse assemblage of filmic language Van Sant employs. This includes documentary (to-camera interviews with real street hustlers), Super-8mm film, time-lapse landscape shots, title cards, and sex scenes consisting of self-consciously faked stills. The polyphony of styles unsettles the centred stability of the film as a coherent whole, and a jagged, transient rhythm emerges – form mimicking content, and vice versa.

As an English speaker with no Italian, my way into this section of the film is through identification with English speakers Mike and Scott, two characters confronted with a language initially unintelligible to them. Scott has an aptitude for effortless transition: the son of the mayor of Portland, he has spent the last few years living on the streets, an environment in stark contrast to his upbringing. He approaches Italian with greater ease than Mike, whose reluctance to engage with the language is indicative of a more general, innate passivity.

The English print of the film contains no subtitles for the Italian dialogue, which leaves an English-speaking viewer somewhat alienated from the Italian characters. The language is rendered an external object and I, like Mike and Scott, struggle to enter into a negotiation with it. The title card carries the first hint that immersion in the language will be total. The viewer is by now familiar with the cards that preface previous sections of the film, reading 'Seattle,' 'Portland,' and 'Idaho'. Rather than 'Rome,' as might be expected of an American, English-language film, the title card reads, 'Roma.' A clear reference to Fellini, this choice proffers two readings. The first places it as a refusal to capitulate to the English language, prefacing the alienation the characters and viewer will face. The second suggests a

self-conscious exoticism, a fetishized Europeaness, which invites a reductive reading of Carmella as a cipher of exotic otherness. It is also of note that the Italian 'Roma' provides an anagram of 'roam' in English, intersecting the translation with a pun, and underscoring the transient nature of the characters and filmic grammar.

The film's first view of Rome is a close-up of Mike waking, followed by shots of the Roman street hustlers from Mike's point of view. These men closely resemble his acquaintances in Portland – one even wears a salmon coloured jacket much like Mike's own, recalling the image of jumping salmon used at the opening and close of the film, again drawing a distinction between the desire to return home and the condition of perpetual transience. They speak to him in what is to Mike an entirely indecipherable language. A reverse shot of Mike shows his panic and confusion, and as he stumbles across the Piazza del Popolo he pulls his jacket up around his throat, like an animal out of its natural environment seeking to protect itself.

Waking in an unfamiliar location is a recurring problem for Mike. He suffers from narcolepsy and repeatedly wakes with no knowledge of how he came to be where he is. Narcoleptic hallucinations appear to depend on the REM sleep process, and it has been suggested by sleep researcher J. Allen Hobson that the REM process operates during sleep *and* wakefulness in those suffering from narcolepsy.<sup>7</sup> This causes confusion in the cognizance of dream images and waking reality – and presents another opposition of two exclusive systems of meaning.

This has profound ramifications for a psychoanalytic view of narcolepsy and subjectivity. It follows that the narcoleptic's ego will endeavour to integrate and rationalize these experiences, engendering a dislocated and precarious subjectivity, comparable to a psychoanalytic view of schizophrenia in which the reality principle is overthrown and ego boundaries are loosened. Here, identity and subjectivity become mutable. This is elucidated in a line from Van Sant's screenplay, cut from the film: 'It's kind of like time travel. It's kind of good.'<sup>8</sup> This was to appear as an on-screen subtitle – another addition to Van Sant's conglomeration of filmic grammar. The sequence was to have formed a monologue from Mike's perspective, segueing from diegetic monologue to voiceover to subtitle, a fast and disorientating movement between modes of communication, suggesting differing or gradated states of consciousness.

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Allen Hobson, *Sleep* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1989), p. 176.

<sup>8</sup> Gus Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho and Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (London: Faber, 1993), p. 111.

Given Mike's mutable subjectivity and particular relationship to consciousness, it follows that he is likely to be adept at familiarising himself with new environments quickly: usually he is able to glean his location by finding something familiar in his surroundings. Thus it seems contradictory that in Italy he remains disengaged from his surroundings and makes no attempt to decipher the language. He shirks the attention of the hustlers and stumbles away across the piazza; Van Sant shoots his point of view directly into harsh sunlight, which creates a lens flare. Mike stares into something which blinds him; any reference point he might grasp for is obfuscated. This device, which manifests itself as scattered light in rings and circles across the lens, draws attention to the lens itself, to the subjectivity of the camera and consequently the protagonist.

Mike's subjectivity is confounded in a field of alien objects: the spires of Santa Maria in Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli, the Italian language and unfamiliar faces. He is unable to comprehend or interact with any of these things and they remain external as objects. His subjectivity is not encroached upon but is rendered redundant; it requires discernable objects to interpret and interact with but finds instead a vacuum. This scenario is reminiscent of dream: a tableau of images which may correspond abstractly to each other yet to the subject remains cryptographic. The proximity of this to sleep – Mike having just woken – is suggestive of hypnopompia, the process in which the subject's credulous dreaming mind attempts to assimilate objects from waking life, though by definition he is always in proximity to sleep, his narcolepsy prompting REM processes during periods of wakefulness.

As we have seen, Mike does not speak Italian, his love for Scott is not reciprocated, and he fails to find his mother, a family, or home. He seems unable to access the systems of meaning that seem effortless to others. While some discourses remain unavailable, he stubbornly refuses to negotiate with available systems, such as the Italian language, which, were it not for his passivity, he could engage with. His narcolepsy leaves him repeatedly dislocated from his sense of self, suggesting that his subjectivity is not so much decentred as completely undermined: his perpetual liminality is due to a perpetual inability to locate himself psychically. Since this displacement is Mike's primary state of being, he has no fixed status to be displaced from.

By contrast, Scott has actively sought a displacement in forsaking his life of privilege and taking to the streets. It may be this deliberate displacement that lends him the agency to negotiate with otherness. In contrast to Mike, he enters into a negotiation with the Italian language, a necessity if he is to communicate with his new lover. On arriving at the farm, he is approached by Carmella. Their conversation is hesitant, since each has only a shaky grasp

of the other's language, but their communication is effective, and Scott learns that Sharon has already returned to America.

Simultaneously, Mike scours the property for his mother: Scott and Carmella's dialogue is inter-cut with two shots of Mike entering a dark room as he looks for his mother. In both shots the camera is positioned deep in the room looking out, an external doorway centre-frame the only source of light. In the first shot Mike is seen entering the room, silhouetted against the doorway. In the second shot he is deep in the room, passing the camera and moving further into darkness as he calls out to his mother.

The juxtaposition of Scott's conversation with Carmella, as he speaks hesitantly in a new language, with Mike's desperate, impatient search for his mother leading him into a dark, womb-like room, presents a binary of progression and regression. Mike's regression has a limited distance to run: on discovering his mother is no longer in Italy, he breaks down and recalls his childhood memories to Scott, before expressing a desire to return to America soon. He recounts his memories of childhood over shaky Super-8 shots of Sharon with her two young sons at a bleak Idaho homestead: 'My mom's house was blue. No, it was green. It was green. How could I forget that?'

The Super-8 footage is endowed with an agency that takes hold of Mike, recalling the difficulty his narcoleptic subjectivity has in distinguishing between reality and hallucination. He responds with tears or panic, and on two earlier occasions the use of Super-8 precipitates a narcoleptic episode. This footage is comparatively naïve and can be read as an embodiment of Mike's skewed subjectivity. Here, it is edited into short, searing images, shaky, improvisational, and shot in a bleached, indistinct palette, the film-stock deliberately distressed to suggest age, the passing of time, and memory. It constitutes one of the most notable disruptions to the film's aesthetic continuity, and contrasts with the other modes of grammar Van Sant employs – documentary, time-lapse, the faked stills – which retain the standard use of thirty-five millimetre film. These shifts between modes are aesthetic only, unsettling the surface of the film and disallowing a unity to the filmic language, whereas the Super-8 footage intervenes in the psychological state of a character, provoking in Mike a visceral response.

As I have suggested, Van Sant uses these shifts in form to imply gradations or differing states of consciousness. The Super-8 images are constructed to be viewed as Mike's childhood memories, accessible to Mike and the viewer, excluding Scott and all other characters. This institutes a complicity between Mike and the viewer, which finds an

opposition in the complicity that develops in the exchange of English and Italian between Scott and Carmella, a device which serves to exclude Mike. After his initial search of the farm building fails to find his mother, Carmella attempts to tell him that Sharon has left, but her words are misconstrued. In this instance Scott is aware of the misunderstanding but complicit with Carmella. This inhibits him from correcting Mike immediately, and Mike heads off in search of his mother again, leaving Scott once again alone with Carmella.

Whereas Mike's exclusion from the street hustlers' conversation in Rome is through his incomprehension of Italian, his exclusion here is more pointed. At the dinner table Carmella teaches Scott Italian words as lovers' play; Mike is present but excluded. Prior to Carmella's appearance Mike and Scott are depicted as a unit; together they double-cross Bob (the Falstaff figure), steal a motorcycle, and travel first to Idaho, then to Italy. Mike's motivation is made clear in a scene in which he declares his love for Scott, whereas Scott's motivation in the partnership is less clear. He accompanies Mike on this long trip, and acts as protector on many occasions, yet abandons Mike readily. His attachment shifts with ease to Carmella. As he learns a new language, Scott transforms from Hal into Henry, suggesting that this new language in some way represents the discourse to which he gains access (that of privilege, responsibility, and stability).

Mike remains outside of this discourse. There is only one instance in which he learns an Italian word, and rather than allowing him access to this new discourse, it serves as an acknowledgement that he is excluded. He finds Carmella crying; she holds a chestnut, and teaches Mike the Italian word for it: *la castagna*.

CARMELLA: If it was bigger, you could eat.

MIKE: I understand.

She then confesses she has fallen in love with Scott. The chestnut, not yet ready to be eaten, might be read as representing Scott, still in his liminal phase, not quite yet a man, not yet ready for the relationship Carmella represents. However, the inevitability that the chestnut will ripen implies that he will complete his transition and reciprocate Carmella's love, in turn forever excluding Mike.

The closing scene in Italy sees Mike further excluded. As an Italian client attempts but fails to communicate his requests, Mike falls victim to a particularly intense – even violent – narcoleptic episode. He is disorientated and frustrated, and we might infer that his narcoleptic

collapse is brought about by this communication impasse, that his frustration at his exclusion from the language leads to an exclusion from consciousness itself as he succumbs to sleep.

For Scott, the Italian trip becomes a rite of passage: in Italy his identity is in flux, and his return to America signifies a new stability and fixed identity. He has left behind the slums of Portland, having already declared that when he turns twenty-one, he ‘wants no more of this.’ It is only when he leaves the liminal space of Italy that his transformation becomes complete. En route he learns of the death of his father – Prince becomes King – and in every subsequent scene he wears an immaculate suit and is accompanied by Carmella, who from this point on *is* reduced to a cipher, a public symbol of Scott’s heterosexuality and rejection of his previous life. The catalyst for this shift in Scott remains invisible, and presents a kind of narrative aporia. He falls for Carmella, acquiring a love object which displaces his identity away from the queer street-culture he previously inhabited, yet this does not explain, in terms of pure character motivation, why he so quickly abandons Mike. It could be read as the necessary outcome of the liminal excursion to Italy: once the liminal state is entered into, it must be exited – its nature insists upon a transition.

This economy of inclusion and exclusion from systems of meaning problematizes subjectivity and the subject’s engagement with these systems. The gaps between systems engender liminality, and successful negotiation of these gaps (Scott) appears to allow a transition across the liminal space, whereas unsuccessful transition (Mike) results in a failure to achieve a fixed position, and permanent displacement. This economy of language also resonates with Lacan’s theory of the Symbolic order, the order structured upon the recognition of difference and the symbolic function. Mike, unable to comprehend the Italian language, recognizes that the language invokes the symbolic function but remains oblivious to its content.

Similarly, Van Sant’s polyphony of filmic language functions as systems which contrast yet never overlap, combatting a tendency to naturalize the language or to provide a coherent continuity. The ramifications here are manifold. If these structures are comparable to the Symbolic order, then what of Lacan’s orders of the Real and the Imaginary? Given that the Oedipal process permits the subject entrance to the Symbolic, what is to be made of the literal Oedipus that bore Mike, the result of an incestuous liaison between his mother and brother? This correlation has far-reaching implications for the subjectivity of both Mike and Scott as they pass through or flounder in the liminal space.



## The Unembodied Self in Luís de Sttau Monteiro's *Um*

### *Homem não Chora*

Rhian Atkin

University of Leeds

#### *Abstract*

*This paper aims to investigate the personal crisis experienced by the protagonist of Luís de Sttau Monteiro's 1960 novel, Um Homem não Chora [A Man Doesn't Cry]. The unnamed protagonist of the novel struggles to participate in society and develops a secondary persona which allows him to separate his private and public selves. R. D. Laing's descriptions of the technique of unembodiment are used as the starting point for a close examination of the behaviour of Sttau Monteiro's unnamed protagonist and its consequences, and a consideration of how this device is used within the novel to allude to the socio-political context of Portugal under the Estado Novo, particularly during the late 1950s, when personal and political freedoms were often heavily restricted.*

*The paper forms part of a wider AHRC-funded PhD project focusing on how Lisbon has been used in literature as a site for crisis throughout the twentieth century, and how the nature of crisis alters in accordance with, and perhaps because of, the changing nature of the social and political structure of the country.*

In this paper, I will use R. D. Laing's description of the device of dissociating the body from the mind as the starting point for an examination of how the clash between the individual and the fulfilment of his role in society is treated in Luís de Sttau Monteiro's 1960 novel, *Um Homem não Chora* [A Man Doesn't Cry].<sup>1</sup> The novel (which has so far received scant critical attention)<sup>2</sup> is a biting critique of Lisbon middle-class society in the late 1950s, and it explores the nature of social interaction and emotional reciprocity in a totalitarian state, and how this may affect or compromise individual integrity. It focuses on a problematic relationship between an unnamed protagonist-narrator (referred to hereafter as the *homem*) and his wife,

---

<sup>1</sup> Luís de Sttau Monteiro, *Um Homem não Chora* (Lisbon: Areal Editores, 2003). All references to this edition will henceforth be placed in parentheses after quotations in the text. Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this paper are the author's own.

<sup>2</sup> I am not aware of any published articles on this particular novel; indeed, Sttau Monteiro's work has been too little explored, with the majority of published criticism relating to his first, highly allegorical play, *Felizmente Há Luar!* (1961), which is taught in schools in Portugal.

Fernanda. The novel charts the increasing tensions between them over a period of just a few days, and follows the *homem* through his visits to a lawyer, whom he has employed to help him find a way out of his marriage; social events such as cocktail parties and family dinners; and his apparently aimless wanderings through Lisbon as he attempts to find a way out of his marriage and come to terms with his personal situation. The *homem* appears to be going through a period of existential crisis (the problems in his marriage remain unspecified and appear to be fairly one-sided) and he is preoccupied throughout the novel with the question of how far he should observe what he calls 'the rules of the game' (of society). There is a focus throughout on how he interacts with others. He frequently puts on an imaginary stripy tie — adopting an alternative persona for public interaction — to enable him to get through social events and maintain a distance between his physical and mental selves. The nameless *homem* is to some extent a universal figure, although his behaviour often suggests that he thinks his feelings are unique. In my examination of his behaviour, its consequences, and the alternatives that are presented, I will attempt to relate his personal crisis to the more general socio-political situation in Portugal at the time Sttau Monteiro was writing in 1958/59.

Laing suggests that ontologically secure people do not suffer from excessive fear or anxiety regarding their position as individuals in the world, and they feel real, alive and differentiated from the world in a way that does not call into question their identity and autonomy.<sup>3</sup> They are embodied in the sense that they associate the flesh and blood of the body with the mind and their own existence.<sup>4</sup> This is usually regarded as normal and desirable, and although it does not preclude the possibility of being challenged by external events, the ontologically-secure, embodied individual is usually able to deal with them in a rational and responsible way. The unembodied person, on the other hand, feels the body to be partially or wholly divorced from the mind with which he identifies himself most closely.<sup>5</sup> In most situations, this is regarded as abnormal and undesirable, although in certain cases (such as spiritual searches) it can be a useful device.<sup>6</sup> Laing's *The Divided Self* is a study in existential psychology and psychiatry, although it does not directly apply established existential philosophies such as those of Sartre or Kierkegaard.

Sttau Monteiro's novel is usually seen (for example in the information on the novel's cover) as a candid representation of (petty) bourgeois Lisbon society in the late 1950s, and although the *homem* is a purely fictional character, Laing's observations and conclusions

---

<sup>3</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Laing, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Laing, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Laing, p. 66.

relating to real individuals are useful here as a lens through which we may view this novel and its depictions of some of the problems raised for individuals living within an authoritarian society which, because of the limitations it imposes on individual freedoms, makes it difficult to reach a position of ontological security. The reason for the *homem's* crisis remains unspecified throughout the novel; indeed, he appears not to understand it himself (p. 16). The crisis appears to have been precipitated by a combination of difficulty in dealing with life's obligations and frustration at the barely changing routine of his daily existence (emphasised by the invariability of the time when he gets up in the morning: pp. 9, 72, 100, 113, 120), together with his desperation to get out of his marriage to Fernanda (see p. 14). There is perhaps an implicit suggestion here that the tedium of totalitarian control, under which personal, artistic and economic freedoms were heavily restricted, has made even the institution of marriage unbearable.<sup>7</sup> Fernanda, on the other hand, appears to be an enthusiastic participant in bourgeois society, and is keen that her husband should attend social events such as the Simões' cocktail party. The *homem* feels entirely uneasy in the company of others and dons an imaginary stripy tie on these social occasions in an attempt to separate his physical from his spiritual self. The *homem da gravata às riscas* [man in the stripy tie] becomes the part of himself that participates in society and which others are able to see. Even the *homem* frequently refers to this persona in the third person, as though he is observing his behaviour from a distance. This persona or other self enables the *homem* to interact socially (despite being obnoxious at times); it is the physical manifestation of the *homem*, used almost exclusively when he is in the company of others within the particular setting of middle-class Lisbon society. At the same time, it allows the *homem* to keep just for himself the part of himself that he views as authentic: the real *homem* is associated with the mind, and is thus kept away from public view, protected by the false, but semi-conformist *homem da gravata às riscas*. Laing describes such a technique as an act of *unembodiment*:

In this position the individual experiences his self as being more or less divorced or detached from his body. *The body is felt more as one object among other objects in the world than as the core of the individual's own being.* Instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a *false self*, which a detached, disembodied,

---

<sup>7</sup> Salazar considered routine to be a political and social merit, although it brought with it a certain isolation and increased the sense of uneasiness in political circles. See Franco Nogueira, *Salazar*, 4 vols (Coimbra: Atlântida Editora, 1980), IV: *O Ataque (1945-1958)*, p. 454.

‘inner’, ‘true’ self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred as the case may be.<sup>8</sup>

Laing observes that this type of split in the personality is not necessarily an indication of psychosis, but that ‘normal’ people often use it in times of great stress.<sup>9</sup> We should observe that, at least once, the *homem* mentions wanting to cry immediately before assuming this persona (p. 92). By treating his mind and body as separate entities, he avoids direct participation in the world. We first see him do this at the Simões’ cocktail party.

On arriving at the Simões’ house, the *homem* (as himself) remains on the periphery, merely observing the interaction of the other guests. He drinks five or six whiskies before attempting to enter into the conversation, and even then he can only do so by adopting this secondary persona, through which he attempts to be what others take him to be or expect of him. In other words, he creates a persona that corresponds to his Being-for-Others, and which he models on their Beings-for-Him (what he perceives them to be)<sup>10</sup>: ‘Resolvo meter-me na conversa. A única forma de o fazer consiste em pensar em mim próprio como se eu fosse um deles. Passo a ser o homem da gravata às riscas’ (p. 28) [*I decide to join in the conversation. The only way of doing it is to think of myself as though I were one of them. I become the man in the stripy tie*]. In this way, the *homem* is able to be seen to observe the rules of the game (something that Robinson explains was key to personal advancement during the *Estado Novo*).<sup>11</sup> However, the device of unembodiment allows him to feel as though he has not compromised his integrity, because it is not really him — the *homem* — behaving in this way. The alternative would be potentially devastating, as Laing explains:

The embodied person, fully implicated in his body’s desires, needs, and acts, is subject to the guilt and anxiety attendant on such desires, needs, and actions. He is subject to the body’s frustrations as well as its gratifications. Being in his body is no haven from possibly crushing self-condemnation.<sup>12</sup>

At this stage in the novel, the device of unembodiment is a temporary measure which allows the *homem* to maintain an emotional and mental distance from the world while still keeping

---

<sup>8</sup> Laing, p. 69. Emphases are Laing’s.

<sup>9</sup> Laing, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> I borrow the terms ‘Being-for-Others’ and ‘Being-for-Itself’ from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), especially p. 241.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Robinson, *Contemporary Portugal* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Laing, p. 68.

up appearances. He soon tires of it though, and in a gesture symbolic of the desire to give recognition to what he calls his 'true' self (p. 115), he eats a raisin from the packet that he carries in his pocket, despite having promised himself that he would not eat raisins in public:

Meto a mão no bolso e tiro uma passa. Isto é contra o regulamento. Prometi a mim próprio nunca comer passas em público. Todos nós precisamos duma disciplina qualquer. Esta é a minha forma de viver segundo uma regra, ainda que estúpida. Há quem corte no número dos cigarros, há quem se obrigue a ler uma página por dia dum livro massudo. Eu não como passas em público. (p. 31)

*[I put my hand in my pocket and take out a raisin. This is against the rules. I promised myself that I would never eat raisins in public. We all need some kind of discipline. This is my way of living according to a rule, even though it's stupid. Some people cut down on cigarettes, some force themselves to read one page a day of a massive book. I don't eat raisins in public.]*

He is obviously aware that individuals must adhere to certain rules if the society in which they live is to continue functioning; the problem is that he desires a different set of rules from those currently in place. The references above to trivial, self-imposed rules that society could easily manage without suggest further that in any society, and especially under a strict, authoritarian regime such as Salazar's *Estado Novo*, individuals and groups start to self-regulate, perpetuating the social and political system in place even when they may not be entirely in favour of them.<sup>13</sup> Yet the *homem's* rule is different from the others that he mentions, which are a way of regulating even the private sphere. The *homem* associates the raisins with his 'Being-For-Itself', or with the 'true' self that he hides from others through the use of the stripy tie persona. For this reason, while he puts no limits on how many he may eat in private (and even when he is walking in the city, because of the lack of interaction with others, this becomes a private sphere), eating raisins in public equates to allowing others to see the self that he wishes to hide from them, and weakens the protective persona that he builds up around himself. Yet paradoxically his instinctive need to feed himself with the

---

<sup>13</sup> The PIDE (the secret police force of the *Estado Novo*) did not kill many people and had a discreet mode of operation that enabled them to maintain what Salazar viewed as an optimum level of terror in order to subdue the nation. Rumours of their efficiency and the omnipresence of their informers led to a type of self-policing which meant, for example, that politics was rarely (and only then very carefully) discussed in public. See Robinson, p. 55, and Tom Gallagher, *Portugal: a Twentieth-Century Interpretation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 120.

raisins, a symbol of his 'true' self, demonstrates how draining it is to be in the world and maintain the stripy tie persona that at the same time he feels is necessary in order to preserve his 'true' self: he is trapped between a social need to repress, and an individual desire to express, his Being-for-Itself. The *homem* is unable to endure the superficiality of the party for long, and leaves early — withdrawing from participation in the world. However, he does not go home, as one might expect, but heads for the city instead, moving away from the sheltered bourgeois society that he finds so oppressive (and that continues in the home he shares with Fernanda) and wandering the Avenida da Liberdade [*Liberty Avenue*] in search of a freedom that cannot be found (pp. 41–44). During the course of the novel, he increasingly retreats to the periphery and ultimately loses control altogether of the secondary persona that facilitates his participation in the game.

The loss of control becomes ever more apparent in the hotel bar, on the evening of his and Fernanda's wedding anniversary, when the feelings of entrapment and claustrophobia cause the *homem* to think about exile:

Olho à minha volta e vejo as três francesas velhas e o meu grupo. Sinto que está iminente um ataque de claustrofobia, que não posso mais, que não aguento mais tempo o Engenheiro Rodrigues, a minha sogra, a orquestra adormecida ... Quero ir-me embora, para a rua, para a China, para onde haja quem viva e acredite em qualquer coisa, seja no que for. (p. 91)

*[I look around and see the three old French women and my group. I feel an attack of claustrophobia coming on, like I can't cope any more, like I can't bear any more time with Engineer Rodrigues, my mother-in-law, the sleeping orchestra ... I want to run away, to the streets, to China, to where there are people who live and believe in something, whatever it may be.]*

At one level, this passage can be read as a purely existential crisis, exacerbated by the excessive quantity of alcohol that the *homem* has consumed (p. 91). It has been cleverly phrased to disguise its allegorical signification: China is apparently the desired destination, as opposed to the Americas, or one of the European countries to which many Portuguese were

fleeing (and thus Sttau Monteiro avoids the attention of the regime).<sup>14</sup> However, if we look at the passage in its wider context within the novel, we can see a more political implication: that the *homem* wants to remove himself from a society in which personal freedoms are restricted.

The tedium of daily existence in Portugal is stated first. ‘Em Portugal as noites são como os dias: tristes e monótonas. As pessoas nem dançam nem se riem’ (p. 90) [*In Portugal the nights are like the days: sad and monotonous. People neither dance nor laugh*]. The *homem* then wonders whether Portugal has entirely lost the ability to share in laughter (an emotion associated with reciprocity, as in the English proverb)<sup>15</sup>, being confined instead to sadness (an emotion more often associated with being alone): ‘Serei que eu já me não sei rir? Será que o país inteiro já se não sabe rir?’ (p. 91) [*Could it be that I no longer know how to laugh? Could it be that the whole country no longer knows how to laugh?*]. Here, he explicitly puts his own crisis on a par with that of the country as a whole, going on to question whether Portugal’s lawmakers have caused it: ‘Haverá alguma lei que obrigue os portugueses a serem graves, pomposos, eminentemente respeitáveis?’ (p. 91) [*Could there be some law that obliges the Portuguese to be serious, pompous, eminently respectable?*]. Finally, the attack of claustrophobia is triggered by Engenheiro Rodrigues’ show of support for Salazar’s government and his comment is a statement of apparent contentedness with the status quo: ‘Há trinta anos não havia hotéis assim, meu amigo ... e não foi a dizer mal de tudo que eles se fizeram ...’ (p. 91) [*There were no hotels like this thirty years ago, my friend ... and that’s in spite of people like you moaning all the time ...*]. The *homem*, then, is unable to find anyone who reciprocates his feelings, either amongst his family and friends or later when he wanders Lisbon’s streets in metaphorical exile, closely observing its other inhabitants who are destined to remain just that — Others. He is equally alien at home as he is abroad.

As the novel continues, the *homem* moves ever further away from the city centre, and his journey through Lisbon — when he stays overnight in a hotel in order to escape Fernanda — takes him across the River Tejo to Almada, beyond the physical limits of the city. At this

---

<sup>14</sup> The phrasing is important here: books were not subject to pre-publication censorship like periodicals; however, they were examined after publication and the *Secretariado Nacional de Informação* [*National Information Agency*] would remove from circulation those deemed ‘detrimental’ to the nation, while the author and publishers faced fines and/or imprisonment. See Diamantino Machado, *The Structure of Portuguese Society: The Failure of Fascism* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p. 81. This particular restriction led to many writers moving abroad where they enjoyed greater freedom. In more general terms too, Portuguese emigration increased continually from 1950. Western Europe became the most popular destination after about 1960, while the Americas attracted around 85% of the migratory population in 1959: See Table II, ‘Portuguese Emigration by Destination’, in Maria Ioannis B. Baganha, ‘From Closed to Open Doors: Portuguese Emigration under the Corporatist Regime’, in *e-Journal of Portuguese History*, 1.1 (Summer 2003), at: <[http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese\\_Brazilian\\_Studies/ejph/](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/)> [accessed 13 January 2007], pp. 1–16 (p. 11).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Those who laugh, laugh together; those who cry, cry alone.’

point, the unembodiment reaches its climax, and the *homem* goes from referring to his other persona as essentially another version of himself (p. 28) to describing it in the third person — as he does when he is dancing with Fernanda (p. 92) — to actually holding a conversation with it, in which the *homem da gravata às riscas* attempts to humiliate the *homem* (p. 115). The respite that dissociation from daily existence temporarily provides is inadequate though, because when he returns home, the same problems remain. As Laing explains, while in some cases this split in the personality may be a means of effectively living with or transcending a basic underlying insecurity, ‘it is also liable to perpetuate the anxieties it is in some measure a defence against.’<sup>16</sup> To apply this once more to the wider political context, we could say that Sttau Monteiro is suggesting here that exile is not a long-term solution, because the problems at home will not be resolved by the simple removal of oneself from them.

This physical move to the periphery of society is preceded in the novel by a symbolic one. The *homem* and Fernanda have a conversation during which she forces him to recognise her as not just a confrontational and indistinct Other who imposes society’s values on him, but as a Being-in-Her-Own-Right (to coin a new term) who both views herself and is viewed by others, as an individual with thoughts and feelings equal in value to his own. Their individual positions are highlighted quite literally by a red light that flashes on and off throughout this conversation. The light is advertising mortgages and loans — another form of obligation, and can be seen as a symbol for the (capitalist) society in which they live. The *homem* keeps all of himself out of the light, even pulling the tip of his foot away from it; Fernanda, on the other hand, has no choice but to position herself entirely in the light:

A Fernanda fica alternadamente vermelha e negra como todo o quarto. Estou sentado no canto, no único local onde está sempre escuro. Só a ponta do meu pé apanha a luz do anúncio. Puxo o pé para dentro e vejo a Fernanda, sentada na cama, como se estivesse vendo um filme em ‘technicolor’. (p. 96)

[*Fernanda turns alternately red and black like the rest of the room. I’m sitting in the corner, the only place that’s always dark. Only the tip of my foot catches the light of the advertisement. I pull my foot in and see Fernanda, sitting on the bed, as though I were watching a film in ‘Technicolor’.*]

---

<sup>16</sup> Laing, p. 65.



Fernanda is forced to accept the rules of this society and live within it, as is symbolised by the light. Keeping up appearances by playing the role of a bourgeois society wife is her only real option for achieving at least an apparent freedom, because socially, she would have nowhere to go if they were to divorce. The *homem*, on the other hand, makes a concerted effort to remain in the shadows. In his pursuit of a self-indulgent integrity, he moves further towards the periphery of society (p. 115) where dynamic relationships of any kind are ultimately unattainable, and alienation (in the sense of estrangement) is inevitable.<sup>17</sup> The alternative for the *homem* is to observe the rules of the game at the expense of his very sense of self (p. 115).

Fernanda's understanding of their situation is dominated by the socio-political constraints of their country and era (p. 99). The *homem* is not prepared to accept any responsibility for the matter, though, or to act to improve their situation: 'Nem eu nem ela temos solução. Nem eu nem ela temos culpa de nada disto. Nem eu nem ela temos futuro e vejo que nem eu nem ela temos presente ...' (p. 98) [*Neither I nor she has a solution. Neither I nor she is guilty in any of this. Neither I nor she has a future and I can see that neither I nor she has a present ...*]. He wants to escape his present obligations that come from the promises that he made in the past, because he believes them now to undermine his integrity, but in doing this, he would be acting in much the same way as Salazar's regime — declaring that he is acting out of compassion but ultimately limiting his wife's freedom.<sup>18</sup> He attempts to view the two of them as equal, repeating 'nem eu nem ela' four times, but under the *Estado Novo*, men and women could never be equal partners as the state and its laws obliged female subordination to the dominant male, especially in marriage.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually, the *homem* realises that the abdication of personal responsibility that the *homem da gravata às riscas* permits him is not sufficient, and he finally experiences an epiphany when he concludes that he alone must find a solution (p. 123). The irony of the novel comes when he returns home to discover that Fernanda is dead. She had gone out to buy

---

<sup>17</sup> Laing, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> For example, compare and consider the following excerpts from speeches by Salazar: 'O povo português compreende a minha linguagem. Sabe que nada me interessa senão servir o melhor possível o interesse comum' [*The Portuguese people understand what I say. They know that I am not interested in anything except serving the common interests as best as possible.*]. 'Apelo ao Povo' (9 November 1961), in Oliveira Salazar, *Discursos e Notas Políticas*, 6 vols (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora, 1967), VI: 1959–1966, 163–73 (p. 173); 'Das oposições ouviu-se um rebate prudente a dizer que alguma coisa mais era necessária, porque com a liberdade não podia fazer-se tudo. Pois não.' [*We heard from the opposition a prudent warning that something else would be necessary, because with freedom, not everything could be done. No, it couldn't.*]. 'A Obra do Regime na Campanha Eleitoral' (31 May 1958), in Oliveira Salazar, *Discursos e Notas Políticas*, 6 vols (Coimbra: Coimbra Editora 1959), V: 1951–1958, 451–74 (p. 469). What Salazar is implying here — and what he insisted on throughout his career as Portugal's dictator — is that complete freedom is unsuitable to the Portuguese temperament, and that a dictator was needed to maintain an ordered Portuguese society.

<sup>19</sup> See Walter C. Opello, Jr., *Portugal: From Monarchy to Pluralist Democracy* (Boulder, CO and Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), p. 25.

raisins for him (p. 128) in a gesture symbolising that she has finally accepted that this is a small price to pay for her continued participation in society. This is not the solution that he was looking for though, because even though he is now free from marriage, his obligations towards his (and her) remaining family and society are still there, if not intensified because of his new social status as a widower.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the novel, then, the *homem* is forced to recognise that not only Fernanda, but also his parents-in-law and all others face similar problems trying to reconcile their 'Being-for-Itself' with their 'Being-in-the-World'. The problem is therefore how to meet the needs of the individual while maintaining responsible social interaction. Exile and isolation are shown to be ineffective during the course of the novel, and the Communist answer is also implicitly rejected when the *homem*'s journey to Almada (a hotbed of Communist Party resistance to the regime)<sup>21</sup> does not produce change. Similarly, delegating responsibility for the problem to another does not produce a solution (for example in his contracting the lawyer to find him a way out of the marriage, but ultimately rejecting the solution that the lawyer comes up with, p. 25, p. 117). Yet we are never privy to what the *homem* really does want, as the text focuses almost exclusively on what he wants to escape. The omission of a clear and effective solution leads us to consider what this might be. The ultimate failure of the *homem*'s use of the distancing and separating technique of unembodiment in the attempt to fit his fractured self into a fractured society perhaps suggests that a fully integrated society can only come about when and because the actors within it are integrated: they are secure in themselves and thus able to participate in reciprocal relationships where the being and needs of others are taken into account as well as, but not to the exclusion of, the needs of each individual. Any change within the country, therefore, must take into account the needs of Portugal as a whole, but still allow, in a democratic sense, for individual and personal freedoms.

---

<sup>20</sup> See Miguel Vale de Almeida, *The Hegemonic Male* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1996), p. 22, p. 23. Vale de Almeida suggests that a widower living alone (not with another member of his family) becomes a marginal figure in Portuguese society.

<sup>21</sup> See D. L. Raby, *Fascism and Resistance in Portugal: Communists, Liberals and Military Dissidents in the Opposition to Salazar, 1941–1974* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 194, 199.