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Between Text and Film: A Contextual Bifurcation in Feliz Ano Velho

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Between Text and Film: A Contextual Bifurcation in *Feliz Ano Velho*

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The present study problematizes the results in character development due to differences in the use of historical and amorous contexts between the text, *Feliz Ano Velho* (1982), and its film adaptation, *Feliz ano velho: uma adaptação livre da obra de Marcelo R. Paiva*. Whereas Marcelo Rubens Paiva (1959) constructs a textual mosaic of life experiences based on historical and political frames of reference within his discourse, the film version of *Feliz Ano Velho* (1987), directed by Roberto Gervitz (1957), utilizes relationships between genders as the foundation of the story. The historical-amorous contextual hierarchy established in the text is thus inverted in the film. The contextual inversion between the book and the film clearly divides the two mediums, especially in regards to narrative. On the one hand, the text could be considered a Bildungsroman in that it is able to convey Marcelo’s journey as he deals with yet another obstacle in his life. By situating the Brazilian political-historical realities within the plot, Paiva interlaces the narrator’s personal struggle with the political strife of the country. On the other hand, the film focuses primarily on Mário’s social and amorous relationships, though at times it also portrays moments of conflict, struggle, and individual development paralleled to those of Brazil. The relationship; however, between the main character and his patria is altered due to the decision to mitigate the historical-personal parallel of the narrative. The current study will also demonstrate that the aforementioned question of inverted contextual formats—historical-amorous and amorous-historical—directly influences the effectiveness of each work regarding character development, specifically between the narrator and Brazil. The final aspect of this analysis will focus on what Robert Stam refers to as moving "beyond fidelity."
regard, though the text contributes certain elements to the story's development as does the film adaptation offers others, both mediums—if studied from a dialogical position—function in an intertextual manner, thus offering new interpretative possibilities regarding the context and character development as a whole. In this sense, the contextual bifurcation between text and film functions on another, more robust level that not only permits new readings of each medium, but also allows for the two to open new doors for other texts and films to transform *Feliz Ano Velho* even further or to utilize it within a grander scheme of "intertextual dialogism" (Stam 64).

It is also important to note that the film adaptation of *Feliz ano velho* preemptively resolves any superficial concern regarding issues of fidelity by including in the title, “uma adaptação livre da obra de Marcelo R. Paiva.” Thus, by announcing at the beginning that the film takes more of a commentary stance (McFarlane 10) in regards to the text, director Roberto Gervitz is able to focus on an alternative story construct for the film. The “free adaptation” approach allows the film to work within a similar plot, while altering the story structure. Similarly regarding the difference in approach of point-of-view; it is possible to note that though Paiva’s story is clearly first-person limited, Gervitz’s film utilizes a first-person, second-person, and third-person limited approach to capture the story. In other words, Mário, the protagonist in the film, is constantly seen, but his view point (the camera angle as if from his eyes and flashbacks based on his memories) is portrayed only occasionally. Nevertheless, these two steps taken by Gervitz—an alternate story construct and multiple points of view—allow for additional possibilities in the film, especially in regards to the psychological realm of character development. Conversely, Gervitz’s film loses momentum concerning character development between the protagonist and Brazil (as a character), given that more focus is centered on psychological rather than historical-political elements. And lastly, it is worthwhile to note that

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Gertvitz’s “free adaptation” thus intertwines the psychological with the amorous, constructing an “intertextuality” that utilizes the text as a point of departure rather than as a regenerated text put onto film (McFarlane 10). An analysis of the psychological-amorous element as the prime element of the character development groundwork would thus merit a separate study.

Regarding character development, it is important to point out that Marcelo Rubens Paiva develops his protagonist—himself in this case—via first-person narrations that cross both temporal and spatial boundaries as he reflects upon different moments in his life. After establishing himself as growing up on “this side of the tracks” (13), Paiva also describes one of his earlier sexual experiences, which took place in an Argentinean brothel. Paiva’s outlook on the experience sets the tone for future relations between genders throughout the book:

Que nada, era um puteiro. Era um puteiro. Bêbados, mas nem tão mal-amados, eu e o Fabião fomos pra Argentina, onde torramos todo o dinheiro em cassinos e mulheres. Que besteira, ficamos duros. Tenho um pouco de vergonha, mas também um pouco de orgulho, pois não era só nos filmes que os caras se estreparam em Las Vegas. Nós também. (14)

Paiva seems much more impressed with having experienced the lifestyle portrayed in Las Vegas than with the actual experience itself.

The film on the other hand, immediately establishes an intricate connection between Mário and Angela and later Ana. Within the first seven minutes of the film, Mário and Angela have already met, though just for a moment. This development, on an interpersonal level, allows the film to create a parallel narrative structure (Corrigan 83) based around Mário’s psyche and his relationships with both Ana and Angela, the latter being an exclusive creation of the film

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medium. The mere fact that Ana and Angela are played by the same actor (Malu Mader) causes Mário’s character to fragment periodically. This fragmentation is the result of interacting with what would appear to be two different women at times and at other times the same woman, though at first it is difficult to make the connection due to differences in make-up, clothing, and hair style between Angela and Ana. At a certain point in the film, Mário’s character must fragment in order to be able interact with another personage of a perceived dual-identity. Said fragmentation creates tension, which in turn, allows for much more space of interpersonal depth as compared to the following lines quoted from Paiva’s text: “Ia ser difícil desencanar da Ana, paixão das maiores. Uma mulher forte, com personalidade marcante. Taurina como eu. Foi com ela que eu descobri que orgasmo e ejaculação são coisas distintas” (29). Paiva's description of Virgínia is another example of the contrast in character development, specifically regarding an amorous context:


Upon further inspection, it becomes difficult to place just one woman from the text within the confines of either of Malu Mader’s characters. One of the key reasons, beyond the psychological element of an amorous duality, is that Marcelo objectifies the women in his life, limiting their character development. He projects his aesthetic ideology onto them and nothing is heard from them in response. Even when their voices enunciate, it is still a voice governed ultimately by Marcelo’s opinion, given that he is not only the protagonist, but also the author. Whereas in the

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film, it is possible to see Ana’s face and to hear her voice. Similarly with Angela; she can be seen and heard her thanks to the third-person point of view provided by various camera angles.

As mentioned, it is of noticeable challenge to try and correlate the female characters in the text to those in the film. This is due in part to the copious quantity of women in Marcelo’s life. Girlfriends, sisters, friends, mothers, and grandmothers all form a support system for Marcelo. This system functions for Marcelo in the sense that he can utilize the women in his life in a way that he can reassure himself of his own existence. This system also reiterates the previously mentioned claim that the women in Marcelo’s life are objectified to suit his needs. Marcelo elaborates, "Fiquei apaixonado a distância. Tempos depois, (ela) brigou com o namorado. Tchan-tchan-tchan-tchan...Novilha solta no pasto..." (81). In the film there is only one physical woman (though two characters diverge from this woman) as a reciprocated (in that she has a voice) object of Mário’s desire. It then becomes apparent that in each medium there is a clear bifurcation regarding the amorous framework of the story. In this sense the film moves in an alternate motion from that of the text. It limits the number of female characters present in the film; the focus becomes more intense on each specific relation. This in turn, creates a stronger story line built around an amorous context. It stands to mention that though the film emphasizes Marcelo's insecurity with women, this aspect is not altogether omitted from the novel as can be noted in Marcelo's self-anaylisis of his amorous relationships with women: "É uma fraqueza minha. De tanta insegurança, eu trato mal a garota, para que ela desencane de mim, e isso é a pior coisa do mundo" (82). In the text, it is Marcelo's character that is being further developed, but the other side of the relationship and the relationship itself, while the women and the actual relationship itself, are relegated to a somewhat superficial level.

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As Gervitz's film focuses on a select number of women, Paiva in turn, centers in on the socio-political scene in Brazil during the 1970s and early 80s. Marcelo explicates his perception of the dictatorship by providing his own fear, grief, and anger through personal experience; the abduction and death of his father at the hands of a bureaucratic authoritarian regime. Paiva constructs his father’s character by way of memory and utilizes anecdotes and jokes in order to give shape to this character. One such example is the anecdote about the family’s dog, satirically named Khe San by Marcelo’s father after a Vietnamese providence that was bombarded by the United States (23). Paiva also crafts the text in a way that exposes his father’s absence, providing descriptions such as the following: “Nunca em toda a minha vida meu pai fizera tanta falta. Não sei ao certo o que é ter um pai, foi pouco o tempo que pude dizer ‘papai’. Mas de uma coisa tenho certeza: ele se orgulhava de mim” (57).

Gervitz too creates and captures the image of Márcio’s father, utilizing the availability of multiple tracks—lighting, sound, and other visual effects—to give the scene a more psychological dimension. However, these non-linguistic sound and visual codes (McFarlane 19)—the blue, red, and green hues, the abstract synthesizer sounds, and the minimalist music—also detract from Mário’s father’s character. It’s worth mentioning though, that the experimental visual cinematic explorations in conjunction with the nondiegetic elements (Bordwell and Thompson 62), such as the aforementioned sound track, are effective from a psychological stance. However, as Mário dreams that he is talking to his father, the ominous and somewhat sparse piano motifs give the scene a maleficent feel, contrary to the novel's dog-naming father. It is important to reiterate that these examples and contrasts refer to the memories of the father's character in both mediums and not necessarily to his abduction.

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Upon a further study of the parallel narrative structure between Marcelo and Brazil it is possible then, to note that Marcelo’s father becomes an integral cog of Paiva’s narrative wheel. Rubens Paiva’s abduction links Marcelo to the Brazilian government and to specific citizens and politicians throughout the story. Marcelo, in turn, participates in Brazil’s political scene. This participatory act within the story contributes to a process of restructuring Brazil’s written history. Paiva is telling the personal story, which recounts losing a loved one to a dictatorship. By doing so, Paiva is also incorporating into the national consciousness a need to recognize this tragedy as a part of the Brazilian identity. I digress. It is necessary to point out that the aforementioned parallel structure between Marcelo and Brazil incorporates several parallel phases: trauma, paralysis, helplessness, consciousness of the problem, and the struggle toward gaining back what can be recuperated from the paralysis during a transition period. What’s more, it is interesting to point out that Marcelo loses the permanent use of his legs and the temporary use of his arms due to a collision with a submerged rock. The blow to the head caused spinal damage, ultimately leading to the incapacitation of his legs. As far as Brazil is concerned, the blow to the head can be connected to the golpe (blow) do estado en 1964. According to the Larousse Concise Dictionary/Dicionário Avançado, the word “head” can mean “diretor” (200). It is thus possible to also correlate Marcelo’s spinal damage to the dictatorship’s abertura or milagro, which financially crippled the country’s economic structure; the backbone to any country. Marcelo is able to recuperate to a point of mobility just as Brazil has recovered from the dictatorship. Sílvia Fernandes concurs with this idea by comparing “a restrição física do jovem paraplégico” to “a asfixia política de uma geração” (154). What’s more, Marcelo speaks of hope when he mentions um tal Lula, the founder of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Luís Inácio Lula da Silva) and

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Brazil’s current president. Therefore, as Marcelo heals, Brazil simultaneously moves toward liberation from its military dictatorship in a parahistorical manner.

Though Gervitz does not completely transfer the text’s historical background to film, he does relegate it to an ancillary position within the film. The cinematic version of *Feliz ano velho* does portray Mário camping out at a protest in front of the president of the university’s home, amidst hundreds of other students and it portrays some other areas of Mário’s political activities; however it is revealed only through dialog and a few specific scenes, such as the scene in which his mother gives a speech to a large crowd, that his father was a victim of the military regime. Whereas in the book, Paiva describes vivid details of being a prisoner of his own home while not knowing the whereabouts of his father, mother, or oldest sister. There is a clear difference then, between the portrayal in Marcelo and Mário’s life experiences as they relate to Brazil's own personal political experiences. Though Gervitz does employ many close-up shots during the aforementioned protests, there still lacks the personal presence that is achieved through Paiva’s use of the first-person account. The obvious temporal limitations allotted to film also restrict the ability to fully develop such character traits and qualities as can be done in the text.

The political importance, albeit a negative one for the military, of *Feliz ano velho* was immediate. The text was prohibited in Brazil for about half a decade after it was published, whereas the film also won at the 1988 Gramado Film Festival, three years after military rule had officially ended. It is possible then, that both Marcelo and Mário have become heroes in their own right; crippled by their regime and by their own life decisions, yet they both persist and each story conveys, albeit either an historical-amorous hierarchy or via an amorous-historical position, what Timothy Corrigan points out in the following quote: “The hero becomes a more recognizably human character who survives as an emblem of a cultural or national memory”

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(92). Lastly, as André Bazin mentions in his article, "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest," the work of screenwriters (and cinema) focuses on a process of "transforming the voltage of a novel" (24). This transformation is very present in the film adaptation of Feliz Ano Velho as various elements, such as the transmutation of plot and character; various perspectives in regards to point of view; and translation to name a few, all contribute to an "intertextual dialogism" (Stam 64). This dialogism is pertinent to reading (or viewing) texts as part of a larger framework and in this case, both versions of Feliz Ano Velho, deepen one another's signification and open more possibilities for future works that either incorporate these two works or that are based on motifs from Feliz Ano Velho.

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