

## Split Wide Open – Reliving Inter-Semiotic Harmony in the Movies ‘The Blue Umbrella’ and ‘Saat Khoon Maaf’

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper explores the politics of translation of a text into film and the semiotic changes that happen as the written language operates very differently from filmic language. While books and novels use metaphors, films depend on the image, image creation, camera and sound all intertwined to interpret the metaphorical text. This paper studies the film maker's interpretation through the semiotics of film making, the translation of the short story and novella by Ruskin Bond; The Blue Umbrella and Susanna's Seven Husbands into the films The Blue Umbrella and Saat Khoon Maaf by Vishal Bhardwaj.*

**Key words:** film semiotics, Intertextuality, translation studies, adaptations

“Ca, c'est du cinema!” meaning “that's really cinema!” Georges Altmann said, when he saw the cover of a book dedicated to extolling the beauty and depth and the originality of silent cinema. While the world may be divided to accommodate both sides but it is needless to say the side which fights for the autonomy of the cinema, that which ambles without the crutches of literature and theatre stands mighty upright, while

the other gropes for recognition and appreciation in the same non accusatory tone. So does cinema really fall in line behind these niche and over thousand year old arts?

Andre Bazin in answering this question laid bare two unforgettable analogies in his essay “In Defence of Mixed Cinema”. For him the problem was simple and one of reciprocal influences of the arts and adaptations in general. He says:

The cinema is young, but literature, theatre, and music are as old as history. Just as the education of a child derives from imitating adults around him, so the evolution of the cinema has been influenced by the example of the hallowed arts. (56)

The other analogy he takes of the history of art: “Malraux has pointed out how much the painting of the renaissance was originally indebted to Gothic sculpture. Giotto painted in full relief. . . . But would you therefore say that Giotto is inferior to Rembrandt?” (56). So is it really wrong if cinema has borrowed from literature?

And is cinema simply a realistic representation of images; pronounced before an audience as opposed to the process of reading analysing and introspecting while reading a novel? Is one process more cathartic or vicarious than the other? Well, in between black and white are shades of grey and a lot goes into these and the debate can run into questions of puritanical nature to justice done to the text to simply ‘whose text is it anyways?’, whether a text can be taken away from the author into the domain of the reader and critic, with the director’s being a critic and the auteur of his film.

The paper while in its undertones may grope for the above answers to fidelity and that of the better art; yet lives by the quote of Andrew, “ Discourse of fidelity was still the most frequent and the most tiresome discussion of adaptation” (12), in the by lanes and nooks of all theory but it transcends such debates and moves onto bringing to the fore the beauty of the conventional and the arbitrary; that which we call signs or the

sign system of these two arts, which are inseparably wrapped in the milieu of society and distinct cultures, follow their own narrative systems; yet aesthetically converge and weave a golden yarn as they go on apprehending reality or reflecting reality or representing reality. This co-existence was given the term ‘intertextuality’ by Julia Kristeva. The two movies under discussion form an ideal contrast to show the same director (Vishal Bhardwaj) working on two vastly different themes that too of a novella and a short story written by the same author (Ruskin Bond: *The Blue Umbrella* and *Susanna’s Seven Husbands*). The director’s interpretation of the text i.e. his response, his translation of it on screen and the audience’s reception of it show the richness of the two media and the possibilities arising out of it. Thus the perception of an ‘audience’ is opposed to the understanding of a ‘reader’ working on Double Articulation. Bazin again aptly says:

Actually the real problems to be faced in discussing the theories of such adaptations do not belong to the realm of aesthetics. They do not derive from the cinema as an art form but as a sociological and industrial fact. The drama of adaptation is the drama of popularization. (65)

Intertextuality has been read more as a harmonising term in the post structuralist spirit where meanings are displaced and dissipated; and in film studies this meaning lies in reading through images, camera movement, acoustics, dialogues and performance, as the director as interpreter translates metaphorical language to the screen.

Cattrysse sees adaptation studies as a domain of intertextuality, “adaptation had better be studied as a set of discursive (or communication or semiotic) practices, the production of which has been determined by various precious discursive practices and by its general historical context” (61).

As per Naremore, “this takes adaptation studies away from formalistic concerns and study it as contextual or intertextual factors” (10-12). This brings us to the above

mentioned concern where we problematise the so called ‘originals’. And seeing an adaptation as a study of intertextuality takes it “away from formalistic concerns” (10-12).

Having said that it is worth its while to quote Cohen here: “despite their very different character...verbal and cinematic signs share a common fate: that of being condemned to connotation.”

To analyze the two texts to see their coexistence and one as an intertext of the other, it is essential establish their difference in material and sign systems. Is there something which is as binding to novels and cinema as it is contrasting? Is it possible for cinema to have a metalanguage or even a language? For long the language of the cinema was thought to be ‘iconic’ and motivated; and much of the discussion revolved around the filmic analogon. With Metz, who brought Saussure’s linguistics to cinema argued that other than representational and analogical the filmic image can be arbitrary as well. Roland Barthes too theorized on the filmic image and gave the term ‘polysemy’ to it. Peter Wollen extended the Peircean trichotomy to cinema saying that it deploys all three categories of sign: Icon (resembling image and sound), Index (through photochemical registering of the real), Symbol (in the deployment of speech and writing). Here if I take even image into consideration, all images are not representational and could occupy the gray areas of being symbolic as popularly seen in the Soviet pioneering of the Montage.

Umberto Eco drew on Peirce and also on the notion of “codes” and “messages.”

A code is a system of differences and correspondences which remain constant across a series of messages. It can be paralleled to the linguistic langue. Code usually refers, however, to any systematised set of conventions, any set of prescriptions for the selection and combination of units. (Stam, Robert, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman – Lewis 30).

He gave the following sub classification of the iconic sign basis on the operative codes in the filmic context:

1. Perceptive Codes (the dominion of the psychology of perception)
2. Codes of recognition (culturally disseminated taxonomies)
3. Codes of transmission (the dots of a news photo, the scan lines of a televisual image)
4. Tonal codes (connoted elements having to do with stylistic convention)
5. Iconic codes (figures, signs and semes)
6. Iconographic codes
7. Codes of taste and sensibility
8. Rhetorical codes (sub dividable into figures, signs, visual premises and visual arguments)
9. Stylistic codes
10. Codes of the unconscious.

While some of these codes form a sound basis of semiotic study others tend to be quite amorphous. But all these codes traverse from a cultural anchorage, in case of codes of recognition or truly iconic codes to psychoanalysis to linguistic rooting in case of codes of rhetoric and symbolic. This far reaching impact of semiotics, known and explored by many semioticians, Roland Barthes in cuisine and couture, remains not just representational in films but trickles into the filmic language and expression.

And in cases of adaptation the translation happens not just in the two media but also in the semiotic shift from the cultural milieu of one to be appropriated to the cultural and language milieu of the other.

When paralleled with linguistics; the cinematic units do not fall into the mould of the natural languages in matching the Saussurean phonetic differences with the semantic differences. The minimal units in cinema, which is a pluricodic medium,

have been given many names such as cinemes or semes. The film thus becomes a discourse by operating with these codes of moving photographic image, recorded sound, recorded noise, written materials; these combine to form a narrative. This makes cinema a metaphorical language and the combination of these codes; though have quasi set signifying procedure is understandable not as a natural language is but through perceptual experience.

This study of cine semiology did not evade even the poststructuralists; Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva. “Kristeva saw in the avante garde writings of Lautreamont, Mallarme and Artaud the paradigm of a revolutionary ecriture. “These literary currents were absorbed to a certain extent by the film-theoretical milieu,...” (Stam, Robert, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman – Lewis 51). The effect of this non conformity to text or laying down an organised list of codes is seen in Metz’ Language and Cinema, where he stresses on the constant “displacement and restructuration where the film writes its own text.” All the codes of cinema constantly compete and the film progresses to produce meaning.

This paper would use the above theories and study the cinematic ecriture to analyse the filmic text and study the semiotic shift from the literary text. The notion of the diegesis; both of images and sound, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the interpretation of the director as auteur.

Both the movies, *Saat Khoon Maaf* and *The Blue Umbrella* open with a strong statement; with *SaatKhoon Maaf* foregrounding a gun and a statue of Buddha; boldly stating through indexical signs the dark shades of the movie with an ironic contrast, and the sight of the cleverly placed bracket syntagma shot; one of Priyanka Chopra(Susanna) shooting herself and then cut to blood splattered on the wall, revealing enough of the fabric of the film yet concealing the climax of the narrative. Susanna’s *Seven Husbands*, the book, reads in a neutral narrative tone of the author but in the movie this

becomes a homodiegetic personalised narration of the servant boy Arun, in the opening of the movie, shown as a doctor. With a voice over narration the story unfolds and opens into the palatial settings of Sussana’s home, shifting focalisation from the domestic help to Susanna and vice versa. While the psychological facet rests with Susanna and her help, the audience views the story with the narrator Arun, with whom rests the perceptual facet of the story. This duality where the audience is seeing the progress of the discourse from the ocularisation of the characters of Susanna and her loyal staff yet there is an overarching narrative as seen from the eyes of the camera and Arun, where there is a moral, and perceptual gaze to the same events, producing an interesting flux. This is due to the problem of point of view which though remains definitive in a book but can never be defined for film as a medium. As explored by Nick Browne in “The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach,” “a spectator is several places at once – with the fictional viewer, with the viewed, and at the same time in a position to evaluate and respond to the claims of each” (12). Gerard Genette introduced the term focalisation, which is equivalent to the literary point of view:

By recasting point of view in terms of focalisation, Genette restricts the term to the diegetic level of the text, to the level of characters and actions: it returns the question of point of view to the basic problem of ‘who sees’. Where a literal point of view is not present, narrative films may utilize specific characters as centres of consciousness, reflectors , or as bottlenecks which convey narrative information...”(Stam, Robert, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman - Lewis 88)

The movie hence expands the first person narrative of the book and enters into layers of episodes; where the narrator himself is the character, hence homodiegetic account, but flows from the optical point of view of Susanna and her body of staff. Each episode then progresses from the focal point of Susanna where the acoustics are also subjected to her moods flitting between

love and revenge, as do the imagery, lighting and the camera movement. Each of these stylistic tools as signifiers is discussed in detail below.

As the narrative shifts from husband to another the predictability of the outcome adds to the excited anticipation. As Andre Bazin would put it in his analogy with the ‘Grand Guignol Play’, “a spectator holds on to the very height of horror to a delicious awareness of being fooled. This private zone of consciousness, this self awareness at the height of illusion, creates a kind of private footlights. In filmed theatre it is no longer the microcosm of the play which is set over against nature but the spectator who is conscious of himself” (113).

From the microcosm of a three page tale that does rounds from mouth to mouth about a tombstone with an inscription of a woman with seven husbands, the director, Vishal Bhardwaj as auteur unfolds the recesses of the movie and strings the episodes with jump cuts simultaneously maintaining the neural cord of the movie; the endless strive to find love coupled with the whim of destroying that which not fulfils or better still errs. There appears to be a distinct Electral complex in the protagonist of the movie which is a distinct departure from the book. The movie recreates the haveli and with strong visual imagery establishes the strong bearings of Susanna in her palatial home, servants, animals and the picture of her father and his strong presence in absence in her life. This closed family must set high standards for the potential husbands. In this midst is the beautiful Susanna in the likes of Scarlett O’Hara in Tara, or the haunting of the place of Rebecca’s Manderley. This visual imagery in the first couple of seconds states what a hundred words would. This journey of Susanna spans a good couple of decades as she flits from one husband to another. The husbands are immaculately sculpted by the director with all possible vices; from the suave Major Rodriguez to the young rockstar Jamshed to the effeminate and seemingly docile Mohd. Wasiallah Khan. Each



lover and suitor brings with him their shade to the screenplay as it moves from the ambitious and jealous husband’s darkness to the young vibrant music of Jamshed to the serenity of the white Kashmir enveloped in its Sufi music. They all come in discrete bundles and each parodies a vice known to humanity to extreme comical levels. These vices take blackness in humans to the next level and the movie borders on reflexivity and triggers alienation and estrangement in its portrayal of these husbands and even the character of Susanna and her help. Susanna colours herself in all these shades of love only to return to her shade of black which “suited her”(showing verbal symbolism) as per her young admirer Arun, who sat their obscured from sight observing and later recounting this tale. There is a powerful motif of the “the death knell” as Susanna would hang herself on the bell before each murder to lament her yet another heartbreak. And quite particularly the next morning, introduced with a jump cut, would show her dressed in black mourning. With a clever camera zoom in and out, the very church would turn ready for another marriage. This clever use of camera to form a repetitive syntagma for all six marriages keeps the plot pacy. There are strewn in between loose ends of a six toed murderer, portent herbs, a bracket shot of the protagonist shooting herself and the mystery enveloping the seventh husband.

Each episode has been made a small film in itself as it progresses and reaches completion with the murder. The continuing string of the movie is the characters of Susanna, the butler Ghalib, the housekeeper Maggie and the jockey with his foster son Arun. Their characters too display extreme eccentricity which flows in their undying loyalty. These aptly contrast the deviousness of the husbands, and their poker faced execution lends the script its eeriness. The three servants symbolise an extension of the enigma surrounding the state and act as one unit. Each of the six executions has strong imagery helped by equally haunting acoustics. The trio towards the end

revel in the murders and from the first murder which happens in silence to the fourth which is conducted by them in a musical gay abandon. An interesting take of the movie on the book is in its explanation of the murders. The author uses the phrase “tired of them” thrice in the book in the furniture walla as raconteur; later as he describes the sudden demise of the husbands he uses sarcastic phrases like “She was quite humane in her way” and “you could hardly blame it on Susanna”. This ambivalence is explored in the movie by the servant’s explanation to the narrator and later the narrator’s directly asking Susanna in his meeting with her.

And the narrator Arun sees it all through unfiltered eyes; simultaneously nurturing an attraction for his benefactress, he brings to the movie a lot of perspective as a true well wisher. His character is a sharp contrast to the chaotic peccadilloes and quirks of the other characters in the movie. The auteur reads into the enigma of the book and brazenly showcases all possible deviousness in humanity through each character. Thus Arun who journeys through all helps the spectator, himself and the protagonist reach a catharsis.

The other movie in this paper is a sharp contrast to the dark complexity of *Saat Khoon Maaf*. It too is an exploration of basic human desires, yet it fulfils its journey through a simplistic discourse, deeply poignant. This movie based on the novella of the same name by Ruskin Bond draws before the eyes all that the book conjures. Unlike the book which opens with Binya the movie opens with Khatri, the Ram Bharosa of the book. The movie spends a good fifteen minutes establishing the various characters and girding them in the text. It helps the spectators, through a neutral focalisation, to familiarise themselves with the characters and the simplistic nature and setting which form the *mis – en - scene*. The children, their laughter, their songs all paint a beautiful *mis - en - scene*. Then there intervenes in this tableau the object and the epitome of

pulchritude which would lend turbulence to this locality. A foreign object brought in by foreigners; the blue umbrella. The movie introduces this umbrella very differently from the book, in fact more dramatic, as the umbrella descends shown in a subverted form not through Binya’s eyes but the umbrella’s point of view as it descends. It sees the world it is landing into and the awestruck eyes of Binya, and then the camera shifts to Binya’s point of view and shows the blue umbrella.

Once the umbrella is introduced in the biosphere everything changes. The focalisation shifts to the village people primarily Khatri, where his binoculars signify that which he seeks or that which is distant and he can’t have. The umbrella is a signifier of everything that these villagers can’t have and envy. The Headmaster’s wife, Khatri, the barber and the elderly all form a leitmotif of unfulfilled desires. The children, on the contrary, rejoice and appreciate the umbrella. As is aptly said in the book, “Unlike the adults, the children didn’t have to pretend.” There are motifs of the bear claw which signify the cultural and societal girding which Binya breaks free from by bartering it for the flamboyant blue umbrella. Just so that the umbrella is not only an object of beauty but utility the line from the book, “just testing it” is elucidated in the movie through a series of sequences and spliced scenes where Binya spreads joy by sharing her umbrella and of course the rain which splatters joy yet destruction and chaos. These inserts are strung into the narrative with songs. The movie uses lighting to showcase the difference in the petty human vices of envy and jealousy and even coveting and the pristine joys of childhood. The headmaster’s wife and Khatri are always shown inside their homes in pitch darkness where they covet and scheme for the umbrella as contrasted with the happy moments which take place outside in complete sunshine. And finally winter descends on Khatri as he lies in decadence after losing face. Each moment of the book is lived with scenic beauty and great music and imagery and motifs of sky blueness, and the simple yet

deep novella is turned into a scenic gaze into a slice of humanity.

Both the movies as signifying practices were rich intertexts of discursive practices of a culture and an entire plethora of utterances. Michael Riffaterre defined it as “the reader’s perception of the relations between a text and all other texts that have preceded it.” Thus there occurs complete harmony as each text, be it a book or a film, is “a montage of heterogeneous discourses within a single text”, and this concept of intertextuality is “not reducible to matters of “sources” of a text in the old philological sense” (Stam, Robert, Robert Burgoyne, Sandy Flitterman – Lewis 204).

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