

# **Moonlight: intertextuality and its dialogue with genetic criticism in the contemporary film adaptation**

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## **Abstract**

In the universe of literary adaptation, contemporary cinematic narrative increasingly crosses the boundary of relationships between the pages of a fictional work and the images of a film. The cinema, like the audiovisual that surrounds it, constructs its discourse in a convergence (JENKINS, 2006) way, seeking intertextual and interdisciplinary references (STAM, 2006). In this process other forms of art and writing may open the door to an experimental and independent language, but is this grounded in theoretical and critical inquiry? In search of an answer or at least a clue on this issue, this study also dialogues with genetic criticism (SALLES, 2004) to analyze the movie *Moonlight* (2016), adapted from the play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* (2003). Its script, when distancing itself from its original text, re-signifies its content, and in this way, manages to build its plot.

**Keywords:** Adaptation. Contemporary Cinema. Intertextuality. Genetic Criticism. *Moonlight*.

In February of 2017, the film *Moonlight* (2016) gained prominence in the media due to the setbacks it faced when receiving the Oscar for best film. An undeniable fact, above all, due to the racial issues of the representation of your team. It turns out, however, that such a film is so rich that it can still be explored on other biases within the audiovisual theory. This production will be considered as the object of this study, not because it was produced by A24 Films; one of the most recent independent producers and distributors in the United States, not even for countless awards it has won since its foundation in 2012. *Moonlight* requires some attention in the face of the audiovisual theory because the critic, sometimes, has not attempted to explore elements of his narrative, definitely far from any classical standard, above all, because his script was adapted from the play *In moonlight black boys look blue* (2003), by Tarell Alvin McCraney.

In the current conjuncture, where audiovisual is seen as a constant convergence of new media and technologies, this study asks: wouldn't there be the possibility of considering this intersection with regard also to the study of the discourse of its creation process? The study of the history of adaptation points to the predominance of a critical-historiographic binomial already well structured (REINIGER NETO, 2019), but which often does not see in

the intertext of the construction of its content, the opportunity to contribute to the growing theory of audiovisual contemporary. Literary adaptation in the cinema no longer fits only the boundary drawn between the pages of a fictional work and the images of a film. As convergent as the audiovisual itself, *Moonlight* serves as an example that adaptation can increasingly add the most diverse forms of art to the construction of its narrative.

To support this cut, at first, the work of Robert Stam is brought. Even though its main publications, like the article *Theory and practice of adaptation: From fidelity to intertextuality* (2006) and the book *Literature through cinema: Realism, magic and the art of adaptation* (2008) work with a quantitative scope, mapping the that cinematographic content processed and adapted from discourse in this broad interdisciplinary spectrum. According to Stam (2006), now not only do literary texts fit into this operability, but also their sub or para-literary sources. In this communion, it is in post-structuralism; between Bakhtin's dialogism and Kristeva's intertextuality, which this author sees cinema as a mediator of the arts in adaptation. Thus, not only literature and visual arts but also, cinema and audiovisual carry a collection of works, at some level, derived from each other.

This analytical strategy aims to go beyond the critical *status quo* that regrets what was lost in the transition between a book and a film, reiterating an alleged superior axiomatic of cinema literature. The aforementioned post-structuralism enters this clash insofar as it subverts these prejudices, its semiotics treats all practices of signification, as a system of signal sharing, or an endless interchange of intertextualities. It must be considered that communication, within this scope, is present from the moment that a text does, when it sleeps with any other text (DERRIDA *apud.* STAM, 2006). The work of art, regardless of its area, starts to occupy the autarchy of the communion; its author, becomes fissured, fragmented, an orchestrator of pre-existing discourses (STAM, 2006). Its construction is nothing more than hybrid, that is, it mixes its own words with the words of others.

In this interdisciplinary and converging communion - which is a metaphor, Jenkins' (2006) concepts can verge - the investigation of any art forms is valid, above all, when the literalness of non-literal phenomena comes up, and this new the figure of the author manages to use them in the construction of his new discourse. The term 'adaptation' itself configures a better status when superimposed on literary adaptation: there are no more privileged places for the novel, it now coexists with other works, which will increasingly undergo new readings and interpretations, sums and conjunctions. Neither a text nor its author can maintain the role of legal authority over the intertextual ramifications (STAM, 2006) of what they produce. Especially because other forms can be created, or reached, such as cinema, which several authors, such as Deleuze, consider as a translator of thoughts in audiovisual terms: blocks of movement in temporal intervals (DELEUZE *apud.* STAM, 2006).

But how can we study this communion of discourses so different? In Stam's rescue of authors of post-structuralism, there is a consensus on the need for greater freedom in the interpretation of the most varied adaptations, since

(...) as any text can generate an infinite number of readings, any novel can generate an infinite number of readings for adaptation, which will inevitably be partial, personal, conjunctural, or with specific interests (STAM, 2006, p. 27).

To list which, and how many productions can establish links with other art forms, Stam can fully exemplify his notes, whether in classic or contemporary cinema; be it at the beginning of post-structuralism, in Bakhtin's dialogism, or Kristeva's intertextuality to Genette. From this author, it is worth mentioning Stam's reading of this concept, especially when dealing with hyper textuality - the moment when a hypertext transforms modifies, elaborates, or extends its previous text, a hypo text. Concerning cinema, their adaptations come to accept jargon such as 'freely inspired', insofar as they become aware that they are hypertexts derived from pre-existing hypo texts. The adaptation no longer fits only in the relationship between literature and script, it now finds pairs with music, as in *The Silver Cliff* (2011)<sup>1</sup>, by Karim Aïnouz; with the visual arts, as in *Loving Vicent* (2017), by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman and with the performing arts, as in Spike Lee's *Chi-raq* (2015)<sup>2</sup>, in addition to *Moonlight* himself, to be analyzed shortly.

Before that, however, it is necessary to ask some more questions that justify the theoretical basis proposed by this study. In *Theory and practice of adaptation: From fidelity to intertextuality*, Robert Stam (2006, p. 35) even tries to propose a "practical/analytical model", free for analysis of the cinematographic intertext. But at the end of his investigation, he recognizes the breadth of this theme, whether by the infinite vortex of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, promoted by this intertext, or by the great cumulative that hypo texts before an adapted film can overlap, without a clear point of origin., in the face of scientific development.

Stam (2017) himself recognizes that much remains to be done, created and revised, above all, in the face of his theory. It is believed here that this review should focus not only on the aforementioned critical-historiographic binomial, already very well structured by the contemporary audiovisual theory but also on the study of cinematographic realization itself. What would be the stages of transposition and adaptation of discourse between a given work of art and a cinematic script? Could this script be the final stage of this process? Since in didactic terms, neither theory nor even script manuals find an assertive answer to this question (REINIGER NETO, 2019) this article, driven by the post-structuralist impetus, of scientific freedom, goes behind areas not so to answer these questions.

It is in the encounter between semiotics and the reading of different forms of art, that a bias can be pointed out for the understanding of cinematographic creation, as well as its status regarding the adaptation process, now no longer necessarily literary, but rather, as intertextual, and convergent as the audiovisual. Cecilia Almeida Salles develops this

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the song *Olhos nos Olhos* (1976), by Chico Buarque.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from the play *Lisistrata or the Strike of Sex* (411 b.C.), by Aristofanes.

concept by calling it genetic criticism, above all, in her article *Dialogues between genetic critic researchers: Brazil and France, in the collection Interart creation process: Cinema, theater and electronic editions* (2004). She points out the vestiges of this methodology already in the literary studies of France, in the sixties, and in the exchange that they traced with Brazil, even if they were not called that way. It is an interdisciplinary process, which from the beginning started with an “academic reception; people who had research objects and interests in common [...], a field always in a state of expansion from different points of view” (SALLES, 2004, p. 7). In this academic interrelation, of different types of research, the manuscripts of different authors have become the object of study. A path to meet and understand the main classics of literature, such as those by Gustave Flaubert.

It was in the turbulence of 1968 that researchers in France instigated the world to see these documents with something coming from the hands of a writer, and not an author: a concept of creation through the materiality of a scripture. Salles, in the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, expanded them to other areas, basing them with the documents of the creative process, what not only the manuscripts but also other records, represent as “indexes of a thought” (SALLES, 2004, p. 9). Thus, the challenge of building critical thinking capable of crossing the boundaries of genres and arts would be up to his work. With this, in addition to literature, theater, and cinema, they also begin to make intersections not only in their studies but also in the works of other authors who find common sense in their thoughts<sup>3</sup>. Many, however, were reluctant to accept the documents of a creative process as the object, or the basis, of a study: where it due to the challenge of breaking with the common sense of the humanities by neglecting thinking over practice; was due to insecurity in dealing with other forms of information, which were not written. In the performing arts, for example, “there are many testimonies of the theatrical event, due to its hybrid and complex properties [...], but despite all of this being of paramount importance in the creative process, its analysis still does not seem to be part of the critical know-how” (GRÉSILLON; THOMASSEAU *apud*. SALLES, 2004, p. 8).

In this search, cinema in particular is investigated within the bias of its production stages. *Interart creation process: Cinema, theater, and electronic editions*, and even other works by Salles (2010), punctuate his creation documents. Storyboards and their pre-drawings, in addition to the writers’ notes, at first, even meet the indicated methodology, but, throughout this collection, we can see signs that History distorts the real objectives of this information. We all know the relevance of works such as those by Serguei Eisenstein, such as *The battleship Potemkin* (Броненосец Потёмкин, 1925), but Ada Ackerman in *The preparatory drawings of Ivan The Terrible [Иван Грозный, 1944]* (2004), when adopting pre-drawings of this film, as a method for its film analysis, gives added value to what is already common sense in audiovisual theory, such as the Soviet montage and the socio-

<sup>3</sup> In *Processes of interart creation*, even though Salles is not one of the organizers, her aforementioned chapter is extremely relevant for precisely presenting and punctuating the main global thoughts of genetic criticism that were translated in the edition of this book.

political context of his narratives, when with this information, he could pay attention to what would be the production strategies adopted in the twenties. What would be, for example, the interference of state power in any direction in the construction of content at this stage of production?

Still, in the attempt to intertwine genetic criticism with cinema, something similar occurs with Morgan LeFevre, in the chapter *The storyboard: A tool at the service of cinematographic creation. The example of Ministry of Fear* (1944), by Fritz Lang (2004). Lang's drawings are adopted not to indicate traces of his aesthetics, or of his creative process, because of the technological adversities that cinema faced in the forties. Throughout his text, LeFevre also adopts common sense, sees this director only from a historical perspective, as a representative of German expressionism, which has been well structured since the end of the twenties, in the criticisms of his works, like Metropolis (1927). But, after all, what would be the path approached by the *Process of interart* creation capable of seeing in genetic criticism, an alternative to investigating the practice of adaptation effectively? Who would understand this processing in a convergent way, just as the cinema itself behaves in its relations with other media (JENKINS, 2006)?

Although Salles (2010) can be considered a benchmark in this methodology, their studies do not trace the approach that Grésillon and Thomasseau perform, when embarking on the investigation of theatrical creation. In *Scenes of theatrical genesis* (2004), both authors manage to establish evidence of the factors sought by this study. Theater, like cinema, is a mutual work, composed of its printed text and its representation. The differences that may exist between their speeches are the result of the processing of their respective creations, making them not closed works, after staging, but rather open and concurrent works, passive to readings and constructions of different studies, criticisms, and points of view. View. Which is up to science to understand, as well as its relevance in the socio-cultural ode.

It is at this point that *Moonlight* is resumed to show that its script and scenes (2016), do not deny its theatrical genesis (2003). On the contrary, they build a constancy of dialectical relationships and interactions which still open the door for other works of art to be added to the construction of this sum of discourses. All without nullity, always taking into account the properties of each of these elements in particular. The relationship between theater and cinema, within the convergent potential of adaptation, points out that this

(...) the writing of the text has the scene as its horizon of expectation, which functions as a secret mental image to be reached; in parallel to the printed text, the concrete experience of the staging can lead to rewriting of the text and, even as it is observed, above all, [...] to the definitive fixation of the textual material itself (GRÉSILLON; THOMASSEAU, 2004, p. 117).

However, the treatment of the scripts appears, above all, in the universe of the film adaptation. There is a need to solidify, and not necessarily equate, the dialogism of

these discourses. *Moonlight* carries a fact that supports this issue: McCraney, author of the theatrical version, also worked on the treatment of the film text, without being attached to the materialism of his creation, on the contrary, adapting his speech to the new format to which his work would contribute. The film presents three moments in the life of a black boy, a drug trafficking survivor on the outskirts of Miami; since childhood, when he was known as Little (Alex Hibbert); passing through his adolescence, with the name of Chiron (Ashton Sanders); until reaching adulthood, codenamed Black (Trevante Rhodes). Son of Paula (Naomi Harris), addicted to crack, he finds himself gay and ends up having the advice of Juan (Mahershala Ali), a drug dealer in his neighborhood. In *Moonlight*, just because its protagonist is divided into three distinct characters, we already have a narrative construction far from a classic audiovisual format. We also note that this narrative has a precedent, a pre-existing lyrical self, whose theatrical rubrics now actually have the dimensions of space and time to be filled. Thus, a narrative of catharsis is constructed, sometimes non-verbal, where the protagonist finds the ideal conditions to break with the dogmas of his mimic ambivalence, derived from his social regime, which immerses him in an identity that was not his. In this silence, seen as a certain distance from his original text, the film *Moonlight* uses interdisciplinary resources in his speech to deconstruct his characters and develop his plot.

It is exemplified, therefore, that textual genesis and scenic genesis evolve, and throughout their productions, the systematic interactions between these discourses are numerous and changeable, but they always use *mise-en-scène* as a way to achieve your deeds. When this definition is considered as the set of physical actions within a certain depth of field (BORDWELL, 2008), it is that it is supported by the text and scene pillars, and allows the transit for data collection in different semiotic systems, such as writing, visual and auditory. Thus, not only the adapted one comes to the fore, but also, its similar elements such as voice, space, props, light, displacements, body, and scenography. In this way, genetic analysis can be transported and adapted, from theater to cinema, when considering that the truth of the scene is not in the autonomous functioning of these separate mechanisms, but in the movement that unites them and gives them life (GRÉSILLON; THOMASSEAU, 2004). In this convergence that is formed, the drama ends up becoming an essence that the narrative builds, and wants to tell, but not always, to demystify.

Still on the transposition of theater to the cinema in genetic criticism, and as this maneuver can help to understand the adaptation of the film text in the face of the convergence that sustains it in contemporary times, other essential factors are pointed out so that it can proceed with the proposed film analysis. The writing of the script's treatments marks the moment when creative thinking projects directly on the scenic horizon. The gathering of this information acts not only as of the genetic testimony of work, but also attentive to the

fact that when this text is staged it frees itself from its base, not requiring it as an index, but rather building a layer of

(...) signs and sensations [...], a type of general perception of strategies, which include [...] gestures, tones, distances, substances, lights, which permeate the text with the fullness of a language to be used. which points to the outside world (BARTHES *apud*. GRÉSILLON; THOMASSEAU, 2004, p. 120).

It is in the breach of that fidelity, which does not follow the chronology of creation, that genetic criticism collects the clues left by the hypo texts of the scene, not as a loss, but as a discourse and tool for film analysis. The author of this, when he realizes that he can walk between the roles of reader and spectator when considering the staging not as an end, but as a stage of work, he can look for other sources of information for his studies, and see the adaptation not as a synonym of reduction, but of interaction with other art forms.

The text of a screenplay is not only work in itself, but also a link between conception and cinematographic experimentation. In scenic genesis, its verbal form is transformed into body, gesture, space, and movement. Cinema, in this study, is considered as a process. Its audiovisual content is one, but not the only possibility of reading its textual parameters. Each interpretation of your speech will always renew its potential. Its staging can establish connections that call us to the most different points of view in its analysis.

In the end, to illustrate the theoretical framework constructed so far, two more moments of the *Moonlight* narrative are punctuated, which converge text and staging throughout his creative process. They converge, above all, in the scope of genetic criticism, insofar as the dialogism of his textual discourse guarantees the maintenance of his *mise-en-scène*, regardless of the *locus* of his staging. There is no denying the theatrical past that Tarell Alvin McCraney took in his co-authorship in the script with Barry Jenkins, and concerning the convergent essence found in the context of contemporary adaptation, this value can be considered as an interartistic catalyst, responsible for enriching the intersemiotic construction of his speech. *Moonlight* values the inadequacy of their subjects' identities in the spaces in which they live. Throughout the entire plot, the dialogues lose strength or take on another form, so that in the interpersonal relations simulacra and simulations (BAUDRILLARD, 1991) of another self, appear in the narrative. What the theater processes with a clipping of light in the creation of this relationship, *Moonlight's* photography direction, carried out by James Laxton, uses the use of wide-angle lenses (RODRIGUES, 2002) throughout his speech, to blur their surroundings and the emphasis on their subjects.

**Figure 1** – The use of a wide-angle lens in Moonlight photography



Source: IMDB – Internet Movie Database (2016).

In this modeling of the diegetic space, the performance characteristics of the narrative, described throughout the script, seems to find the ideal conditions for its realization. Following thirty-one, from his last treatment, there is a description of the following situation: "Paula and Little face each other. Little standing under his mother's feet. We observe them in the course of something, at the end of something" (JENKINS, 2016, p. 28). By the parameters proposed by Comparato (2000)<sup>4</sup> and other authors of script manuals, this would be a sequence close to ten seconds in length, as it occupies 1/6 of your page. It can be said that it still has some relationship with the work of Caravaggio, *Madonna and the child with Santa Ana (Madonna dei palafrenieri, 1605)*, for referring to the mother who carries her child under her feet.

But, as an indication that genetic criticism sees cinema as an unfinished work, or that adds adjustments throughout its creation process, it is clear that the construct of *Moonlight*'s discourse did not result in this information. This scene, in the film, has not only a longer duration but also another decoupage, another axis of disposition of its actors. The extra-diegetic soundtrack - which features the composition of *The Spot*, by the young pianist Nicholas Britell (2016) - is also responsible for inducing this reading. The creative genesis of this act came from a text, but the way it is laid out in his script emphasizes Barry Jenkins' conduct in his production. There is not even a way to approach a classic melodrama (ALTMAN, 2000), because music suppresses the characters' dialogue. Paula and Little face each other, in opposite diameters. The boy's look is passive. It remains for him to be complicit with this situation. Your mother's rebuke, unnecessary. Suppressed by the trail, the status of your performance already sends the desired message.

<sup>4</sup> Which considers a minute of film, the equivalent of a screenplay page.

**Figure 2 – Madonna and the child with Santa Ana (1605), by Caravaggio, and the *mise-en-scène* of Moonlight**



Sources: Galleria Borghese (1605) and IMDB – Internet Movie Database (2016).

In the second moment listed for this analysis, it is noticed that years later, in the eighty-three sequence of the script, Little, who then goes by the code name Black, decides to meet his friend Kevin (André Holland), with whom he had his first homosexual experience as a child. This fact was not carried forward, because, due to identity policies, in the *habitat* where they were inserted; in the face of drug trafficking, the heteronormative simulacrum (BAUDRILLARD, 1991) was a survival strategy. Kevin, still in his adolescence, was arrested. On an intimate visit, Samantha (Hevelin Morcion) became pregnant. His son, Kevin Jr., would now need a father to support him. He then realized that it was necessary to compose himself, to resume his life, even on parole. Black embarked on drug trafficking, took care of all the assets, left by his mentor, Juan. Now, athletic, weapons, piercings, and car of the year, he makes use of all these allegories to impose fear. When in fact this fear, would become a trigger to expose your real feelings for your old friend. Black and Kevin meet at the restaurant where he works. With what he learned in prison, he ended up taking a taste for cooking, which led him to cook, with affection, for his unexpected visit.

Kevin serves it: rice, beans, and fish washed down with wine. The two talk as if in a process of recognition of territory. Gradually, each one gives up the allegory he used to maintain his status, and Black assumes that apart from his work, nothing has changed. He's

still single. Eventually, he visits his mother at the rehab clinic in Atlanta. In the script by Jenkins and McCraney, at the end of this sequence, there is yet another indication of how relevant genetic criticism can be for the study of the contemporary film adaptation. The soundtrack, which is usually marked only in the post-production of a film (RODRIGUES, 2002), on this occasion, has its presence already marked in its script, its creative genesis. Thus, the song *Hello Stranger* (1963), by Barbara Lewis, assumes the role of a narrative instance (AUMONT, 2012), it becomes not a melodramatic artifact, an air conditioner of the diegesis (TRAGTENBERG, 1999), but the dialogue between the characters, adapted to each gesture, to each look, as reported by the stanzas below

Hello stranger  
It's so good to see you back  
How long was it?  
It seems to have been  
A long time  
It seems to have been  
A long time

I am so happy  
You passed  
To say hi to me  
Remember when it was like this?  
(LEWIS *apud*. JENKINS, 2016, p. 93).

Sequences later, Black assumes that Kevin was his only man. That since the first relationship between them, on the beach sand, under the moonlight, no one had ever touched him. Friends don't have sex again and Barry Jenkins' narrative comes to an end. More than a classic format, a moral of the story, or a happy ending, its plot seeks clarification, a reframing of its protagonist's identity policy. A young man incredulous of his unconscious, and targeted by the minority of which he was a part, who sought only some alternative to survive.

Despite the new times, it was not expected that such an experimental, or even subversive, production in its aesthetics and language would win the Oscars for Best Film, Supporting Actor (Mahershala Ali), and Adapted Screenplay. In this study, we did not seek a broad and detailed investigation of all its content, but the objective was to point out that the research methodology for contemporary audiovisual theory, when it behaves in a convergent way, just like its own core, only tends to get rich. The genetic criticism of Salles (2004), although imprecise with cinema, is open to affection and not to scientific criticism. There is not the *status quo* of only one of the poles of the adapted discourse,

but the rescue, or the dialogue, with Robert Stam's intertextuality, and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical constancy.

Genetic criticism has emphasized the question of the unfinished. The creation process is a work in progress that allows infinite incorporations, representations, and readings of a text. An open process, which if so considered, may bring the script, cinema, and audiovisual itself, contemporary reflections to always renew the mastery of its aesthetics and epistemologies.

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