Novellisation and Creation

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Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between creation and novelization (i.e. the transposition in fictional form of films and screenplays). It first examines the reasons why novelization is considered "bad taste", analyzing the institutional, aesthetic, semiotic and practical constraints that seem to stifle the work of the "novelizer." Secondly, it opposes two ways to position oneself regarding these constraints: refusing them, on one hand, or considering them as a source of inspiration, on the other. Finally, this article examines the contributions of novelization to a theory of writing under constraint and to creation in general.

In the traditional sense of the word, creation is synonymous with invention, or even, in the romantic tradition of inspired genius, with ex nihilo invention. Creation is also synonymous with innovation and personal contribution, in a word: transformation. From this perspective, novelization, or the rewriting of a film in novel form, seems to be at odds with any idea of creation. This genre, rarely studied, but of which the institutional and economic importance should not be underestimated (Baetens, 2008; Baetens & Lits, 2004) [1], indeed combines all handicaps. Even leaving aside the general contempt of which novelization continues to suffer, this type of fictional writing remains, in the eyes of many, the epitome of gagged and limited writing, doomed because of the multiple constraints imposed on it.

Even if it can lead to simplification, one can summarize these constraints in the four following areas: institutional, aesthetic, semiotic, practical.

The first problem, where institutional and imaginary issues merge, refers to the fact that conventional novelization is basically a commission. Unlike the novelist (or at least the novelist imagined by the contemporary public), the novelizer is not the one who has initiated the writing of the text. Novelization is not undertaken because an author dreams of writing it, but because others, whether it is a film production company, a television channel or even a publisher of general literature, want to provide the public with a "narrated" [2] version of a recently released film. The main motivation is always financial: to take advantage of the success of a film for the benefit of derivative products (including novelization), but also to add to the success of the film itself by the multiplication of these products.

A novelization is therefore not a text resulting from the desire of an author anxious to give an original and individual form to a very personal idea. On the contrary, it comes from the decision of a cultural industry that needs "content" for a commercial structure specializing in the distribution and sale of so-called "symbolic" creations (see Hesmondalgh, 2012, who calls creators "symbol creators"). In this type of "industrial literature," [3] the desire to create comes more from the producer than from the creator, which of course does not mean that the role of the creator is limited to the mere execution of a series of specifications, even it is undeniably the case. Indeed, it is important to never forget that commercial novelization must meet a large number of predetermined criteria, notably in terms of length and style (novelizers are expected to submit a manuscript in a certain number of words or signs, written in the style of a particular text-model) and that, in addition, the producer has the final say on the work produced.

The novelization industry is a relatively closed world where most of the texts are written by the same authors, sometimes writing under a pseudonym (for an almost sociological approach of the novelization industry, see the book of interviews by Larson, 1995, which is full of anecdotes about new versions required by producers). The example of Christopher Priest, novelizer of David Cronenberg's eXistenZ (Priest, 1999), first under a pseudonym, and then under his own name [4], offers an excellent testimony of the tensions that may arise between the commissioners and the author of a novelization (Van Parys, Jansen & Vanhoutte, 2004). In the public eye, these constraints are clearly perceived as infringing on the creative freedom of the work.

Novelization being an undervalued practice in terms of symbolic value, one will not be surprised to learn that many novelizers are actually women or, even more symptomatic, that novelizers using a pen name sometimes use female pseudonyms (or vice versa, of course). Contemporary film production, dominated by the novelizations of American blockbusters, uses a large number of female authors, for example Eleonore Fleischer. This however is not new. In the fifties, for example, the "Roman-Chocs" collection (Seghers publishers) which was the largest collection of novelizations on the French market, comprised of as many books written by women as by men, and once again, the actual identity of some authors who hid behind ambivalent pseudonyms such as "Claude Francolin" (who novelized À bout de souffle by Godard) remains a mystery to this day. The collection presented a number of films considered as "masculine", such as those of the New Wave or "hard-boiled" detective thrillers, such as the film adaptation of I Spit on Your Graves (whose novelization no longer had much to do with the original work by Vernon Sullivan/Boris Vian) [5]. The novelization of these works by women is testament to the culturally "minor" character of the genre. Economically, novelization is important and is very present in some areas of the book trade. Culturally, it remains as invisible as the novels of the Harlequin series.

The second problem is related to aesthetics. It relates to preserving or respecting the principle of faithfulness. A novelization is supposed to keep the plot of the film, as it is forced to stay as close as possible to the meaning and tone of the novelized work. On this point, the difference with adaptation practices [6] is considerable. Gone are the days when, in the name of "French quality", the script writer was required to perfectly respect the adapted literary text. The famous controversy led by François Truffaut, spokesman of the "authors" of the cinema industry and who was against such adaptations (Truffaut, 2000), has not only revealed the largely ideological character of this type of adaptation, it above all paved the way to more personal and freer forms of adaptation. Such an approach is now totally accepted, without having nevertheless imposed itself as a universal standard. For example, one can hardly imagine an adaptation of Harry Potter which would radically transform the form and content of the original books. One should not be surprised: novelization totally belongs to the most commercial productions, where the notion of faithfulness, violently rejected by "arthouse" cinema, continues to serve as an almost absolute reference (for a recent discussion on this, see Geraghty, 2009). A "good" novelization is not a novelization that reinterprets the film, but that allows one to imagine it or, more often, to experience it again in another way.

The third problem with novelization is a semiotic one. In contrast, once again, to film adaptation, novelization does not necessarily face the problem of transitioning from one type of sign to another. If adaptation involves the conversion of written signs (usually a work of fiction, in any case a source text of a verbal nature) into a series of other signs (usually images, complemented by a soundtrack mixing music, sound and dialogue), novelization often remains within the same category of signs. Indeed, standard novelization does not incorporate and rework the visual material of the film, but its verbal pre-text. Nine times out of ten, commercial novelization (we shall return to its other forms later) uses for its basis the script or continuity of the dialogue of the upcoming film, and of which the production is still in progress when the novelizer is commissioned to write the novelization. Such a situation makes the task easier for the novelizer on a semiotic level: far from having to rethink the image in verbal signs, he/she may only have to complete or "tweak" an existing narrative and dialogue. At the same time, this apparent convenience also has its own problems. As, if novelizers do not

have to "translate" visual elements into verbal elements, they are also forbidden to invent anything that would deviate from what will be eventually shown on the screen. The novelizer often does not know much about the film, for the simple reason that it is not always completed at the time of writing the text, and when in doubt, the novelizer is strongly advised to avoid such invention. Hence, for example, the scarcity of descriptions (faces, scenery, objects, landscapes) in novelizations.

Finally, the fourth difficulty is practical. Between the commission and the signing of the contract, on the one hand, and the submission, rewriting (and sometimes translation) of the manuscript, printing and distribution of the book on the other, time is not only very short but also often non-existent. The book and the film must indeed be released simultaneously, otherwise the commercial career of the novelization and even more so its contribution to the marketing campaign may be compromised. Even less so than other books, novelization is not made to last, and without the corresponding film that supports it (as much as it supports the film), its chances of finding an audience are almost zero.

What counts in novelization is the moment, and this moment is never that of the book but that of the film. If a novelization arrives too early on the market, it seems to have no negative impact on the attendance of the film, as long as the time difference is not too large (the fact that the audience already knows the end of the story does not diminish the curiosity of also knowing how this ending was filmed). But when the novelization comes too late, that is to say when the film is no longer being shown in cinemas, it becomes a "dead" object: the public is no longer interested in the book, and from a commercial point of view, such novelization is as ineffective as an interview or an article published three months after the film's release. The life of a film indeed continues after its career in cinemas, but the selling point for the DVD is never the book but the various bonus features (of which the novelization is never part).

Faced with such a situation, how does one envisage creation? Basically, two types of answers seem possible.

The first and most obvious, but not necessarily the easiest, is to reject or break the protocol, code, standards, conventions, in short, the "novelization system." To refer to the four obstacles presented above, one could say that such approach of novelization would, to begin with, break institutional constraints. Instead of putting himself at the service of a commissioner, the novelizer then decides to write the novel himself. The risks of such a decision could be problematic. On the one hand, the manuscript may not find a buyer. On the other, the rights-holders (and they are always numerous in the cinema industry) may oppose either the book's release or the digital dissemination of certain novelizations (one wishes good luck to the authors of an unauthorized novelization of the Adventures of Tintin, both as a comic and as a film). Of course, in the art world, such considerations are unlikely to scare the creators, whom are known, as Pierre-Michel Menger nicely put it, to aspire above all to "find fulfilment in uncertainty" (Menger, 2009).

Breaking the aesthetic boundaries of the genre indeed remains in keeping with this. Independent novelizers tend to emphasize their autonomy by straying from the original work. Fans invent new scenes or redefine the meaning of certain characters (the classic example is of course the gay reinterpretation of Star Trek, see Penley 1992). Those who dream of a more legitimate career can envisage rewriting a movie as a poem (Baetens,

2006), which often solves the thorny issue of copyright: the difference between the original work and the work which derives from it is then so great that accusations of plagiarism naturally appear groundless, without forgetting of course that the economic value of poetry is, in any case, negligible, to say the least.

Thirdly, the rejection of the conventions can also be observed on a semiotic level. As seen above, conventional novelization mainly aims at reproducing a story, a screenplay or dialogues, in short, textual content, and the transposition of images is not part of the novelization's purpose. Similarly, these novelizations above all try to tell the story in a fast and efficient way, without any stylistic hindrance. Another approach to novelization would then be to put forward whether the artistic value of the images of the film, or the stylistic qualities of the novel that results from it. In more literary novelizations, the initial plot is often put aside and for example replaced by visual descriptions, which are so rare in conventional novelizations. Unlike the latter, which only focus on the narrative, the literary forms of the genre really present themselves as the transposition of a visual object and experience: the images of a film and how the author of the text responds to them. The plot can also be rewritten and transformed to involve, and then lose the reader in it, as in Cinéma by Tanguy Viel (Viel, 2000), the novelization of Sleuth (1966) by Joseph Manckiewicz, which progressively goes from the transcription of a film to then become the display of a singular neurosis. The narrator of the book is not only a fan of Sleuth, but this film, which he watches over and over again, quickly becomes the pretext for a dialogue, then for an obsessive struggle with the reader, whom the narrator wants to both seduce and dominate, knowing that the balance of power may be in favour of the opponent, a situation which is obviously reminiscent of the psychological conflict that is at the centre of Manckiewicz's film.

Finally and fourthly, independent novelization also quite often eludes the practical constraint of absence of a temporal gap between the production of the film and that of the book. Artistic novelizations are rarely written in direct contact with the work, even if this scenario has actually been observed. Most of the time, the authors, in a typical "film-lover" approach, return to the films they loved in their youth, when they discovered cinema, whether in theatres or on television. The example of Viel, who novelized a film dating from 1966 and not from 2000, is representative of this trend, which is also found in the area of fandom [7], very sensitive to the nostalgic dimension of culture.

Whatever the value of such "unconventional" novelizations, this type of approach is far from exhausting the creative possibilities of the genre. There is indeed another way to address the issue of creation, less romantic perhaps, but with an undoubtedly bright future. It is achieved not by exploring the antagonism of freedom (favourable to creation) and constraint (hostile to creation), but by reflecting on the place given to creation within the constraint. Generally, it is now quite accepted that constraint can indeed support creativity. Due to the success of Oulipo (Oulipo,1988) [8], both on a theoretical level and in terms of the work produced, then to the gradual opening of the minds to more pragmatic or even more "down to earth" conceptions of the arts of writing as a craft that can be learned (McGurl, 2011), and finally to the fact that the two spheres of culture on the one hand and of cultural industries on the other hand are undoubtedly becoming closer, the apprehension of constraints has begun to diminish.

But one cannot limit oneself, however, to observe that novelization, which combines so many constraints whose status and nature are sometimes very diverse, offers new opportunities to forms of writing that allow authors to "invent something" when they lack inspiration (in Oulipian circles, which are very close in this sense to the convictions of Raymond Roussel, the "restorative" function of the constraint is widely accepted). One must above all examine how novelization can bring something new to the approach of constraint in general, whose contribution to creation is both well known and rarely explored in terms of methodology (an interesting attempt in this area is the testimony of François Bon (Bon, 2005) on his experience as a facilitator in a writing workshop). In this regard, at least three elements deserve further examination.

We have noted earlier the absence, apparently paradoxical, of descriptions in novelizations. This visual deficit is easily explained: the aim is to prevent, at all costs, the reader from identifying, in the text, elements that he/she would not be able to find in the original work. But beyond this purely practical motivation, the process of novelization could draw attention to the literary use of a principle well-known in the design industry: do not harm (one knows the importance of this maxim in the work of a typography expert such as Edward Tufte, for example). Through its concern of "not doing" certain things, which somehow reminds us of Bartleby [9], novelization allows one to free oneself from a vision of creation that is too exclusively attached to the values of invention and innovation, and to give a new value, and quite simply, a new vigour, to certain strategies of avoidance that are as important for the creative process as the moments of brightness and brilliance that one usually associates with them. The principle of avoidance also has a major educational dimension for the creator: it forces him to question the elements he has to deal with, those he must put aside, those he must use without nevertheless giving them undue importance, and finally those he must mobilize to better silence them. Such negotiation, of which novelization gives an example on almost every page, is essential in creative self-learning.

The second lesson that can be drawn from novelization, as a specific "high constraint" form of writing, is the awareness of the divide, within the creative process, between what results from invention on one hand, and from repetition and re-use, in a word, from copying, on the other. Novelization is a genre that combines both, in varying proportions, the scope and the value of which remain open to debate. It is never purely repetitive as, even in the most detailed commissions, the portion of uncertainty remains present, if only in the novelizer's ability (or not) to pull out the feat of producing the text in record time (in extreme cases, the time available is reduced to a few weeks). It is never entirely original either, since the producers and the public would be unable to accept a genre that would operate as a hapax [10]. It mainly shows how creation and routine need each other. Without the "safety net" of a variety of techniques and processes that can be enclosed within the "black box" of the creator, it is impossible to make progress. The desire to reinvent "everything" and to make a fresh start is not always the most effective creative approach. The novelizer, who never creates from nothing but from many constraints (too many, according to some), whether said or unsaid, high or low, exemplifies the interest of the procedures and practices, i.e. the "beacons" of creation.

Thirdly, novelization also teaches us something fundamental about the relationship between creation and time. The opposition, or rather the pseudo-opposition, between routine and creation, indeed takes a very singular form in the work of the novelizer, who, at least when he agrees to undertake a commission, works

against the clock. He has a deadline to meet and it is often short, very short. In itself, such a constraint is not necessarily creative: the lack of time stifles the work and the poor quality of some novelizations (not to mention their translations) can be attributed to this "time pitfall". But routine, haste and extreme precipitation can be perfectly creative, provided they are part of a more comprehensive approach, which takes, for example and paradoxically, the time to think about issues of selection (the famous question of Lenin, "what to do?" should also be read as: "what not to do?") and of reuse (the same question can then be divided into "what to do?" and "what to redo?").

These few examples show that a practice as commonplace and disparaged as novelization can provide new insights in the reflection on constraint and, therefore, on creation. Even today, high constraint writing is still struggling to escape the romantic pitfalls it would like to overcome. Thus, the theory of the constraint refutes the naive idea of inspiration coming from above. However, many creators reintroduce in another way something they had previously rejected. While the concept of genius, for example, is rightly criticized, it surreptitiously reappears through the praising of difficulty and originality. Oulipo considers as aesthetically superior everything that has never been done before (a good constraint is a constraint which nobody else has ever thought of before) and strongly values the barriers to realization (even if Oulipo promotes the sharing of constraints, it sometimes also dismisses as trivial the constraints considered as too "easy"), as if creation and rarity or creation and singularity mutually implied each other. The example of novelization, probably questionable in many respects, opens the door to creative forms within industrial cultural practices, which can no longer be opposed, without any remainder, to the field of prestigious culture.

6. Footnotes:

[1] Novelization appeared in the 1910s, first in the press, both American and French, which published "serials" in serial form. The aim of these first novelizations is clearly advertising. Rapidly, these serials were gathered in brochures and books, and, in the 1920s, the publication of films as narratives in books became a common practice. Novelizations then became a way whether to keep track of the film one liked or to replace the film that one has not been able to see at the cinema (especially for those who lived far from major cities).

[2] The term "narrated film" was often used in the inter-war period, even if the distinction between novelization itself and ciné-roman was not always that clear.

[3] The concept of industrial literature was created by Sainte-Beuve; see his article of the same name published in La Revue des Deux Mondes in 1839

[4] One must remember that Luther Novak/Christopher Priest has also novelized Mona Lisa by Neil Jordan (1986).

[5] Here is the complete list of the works published in this collection: D'Eaubonne, F. (1959). Les tricheurs. D'après le film de Marcel Carné. Paris: Seghers; Jean-Charles, J. (1959). Les Cousins. D'après le film de Claude Chabrol. Paris: Seghers; D'Eaubonne, F. (1959). J'irai cracher sur vos tombes. D'après les travaux cinématographiques de Boris Vian et Jacques Dopagne. Paris: Seghers (édition de poche: L'inter, 1972); Do Canto, V. (1959). Orfeu negro. D'après le film de Marcel Camus et la pièce de Vinicius de Moraes. Paris: Seghers; Rousselot, J. (1959). Les Tripes au soleil. D'après le film de Claude Bernard-Aubert. Paris: Seghers; Francolin, C. (1960). À bout de souffle. D'après le film de Jean-Luc Godard. Paris: Seghers; Marsan, R. Le Beau Serge (1960). D'après le film de Claude Chabrol. Paris: Seghers and Marsan, R. (1960). Les Mordus. D'après le film de René Jolivet. Paris: Seghers. Two novels translated from the English were also published: Ray, N. (1956). La fureur de vivre (Mesritz, A., trans.). Paris: Seghers/Verviers: Gérard & Cie and Cobb, H. (1958). Les Sentiers de la gloire (Falk, A., trans.). Paris: Seghers/Verviers: Gérard & Cie.

[6] Admittedly, novelization is also, in a very general manner, a form of adaptation that transforms a work into another form, usually within another medium. In this sense, and in the specific area addressed in this article, there should not be any difference between a film adaptation, which converts a book into a film, and a "novelizing" adaptation, which converts a film into a book. But while a film adaptation usually involves a change of medium (except in the case of a remake, which converts a film into another), a novelizing adaptation usually implies the use of the same medium, namely the written medium (although, as discussed below, there are also novelizations that are not based on a text but on a visual work).

[7] Fan culture is often a nostalgic one, which is built around certain cultural objects whose memory one tries to keep alive, while enriching it constantly with new additions. On the relationship between popular culture, cultural participation, collective creation and taste for the past, see in particular the work of Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, J. (1992). Textual Poachers. New York: Routledge), but also, in a perhaps more original manner, Jonathan Lethem's autobiographical essays collected in the book The Disappointment Artist (Lethem, J. (2005). The Disappointment Artist. Londres: Faber).

[8] This general publication can be complemented by the very rich information presented on the group's website: http://www.oulipo.net/

[9] "Bartleby, the scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" is a short story (1853) by Herman Melville, the author of Moby Dick, in which the hero, who works as a scrivener in an office on Wall Street, gradually refuses the work given to him by his boss, saying "I would prefer not to".

[10] A hapax is a rare word that occurs only once within a specific context. It refers by extension to works that are the only ones to exemplify a genre or category.

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