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Auteur Evolution:

A Comparative Study in the Adaptational Techniques of American Cinema Directors and Their  
European Predecessors

**Abstract**

This paper presents a comparative analysis between the adaptational techniques of two commercial American directors as they respectively adapt the cinematic conventions of two independent European directors. Primarily, I examine the Jean-Luc Godard film *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), and its Stanley Kubrick led, spiritual adaptation, *Lolita* (1962); as well as, Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* (1972) and the famous Woody Allen Bergman pastiche, *Interiors* (1978). The paper investigates the less conventional modes of adaptation which range from production technique, thematic convention, to cinematographic language, and the unifying philosophy of cinema that guides a creative. Neither set of films inscribe a textual adaption but rather a deliberate collection of filmmaking processes as guided by an auteur director that, I argue, constitute adaptational work in the aggregate.

## **Terminology**

This paper is about the adaptation of directorial styles in cinema where a line of succession can be followed from auteur to auteur in a way that constitutes a reconfiguration or interpretation of foundational ideas or techniques to a degree that exceeds homage or other such qualifiers. Because the demarcation of boundaries in the terminology can become abstracted or imprecise, we will work with both restrictive definitions as well as statute of limitations for which those definitions are applicable. For instance, it may be unreasonable to say that every film produced in 2022 that used a close-up—which was surely every film produced in 2022—was an adaptation of the directorial style of D.W. Griffith. Instead, I will attempt, whenever possible, to produce documentation of adaptational intent or, at least, empirically reasonable connective tissue between texts. Furthermore, the focus of this analysis will attempt to overcome homage or citation as homage is often retrospective and incidental and not often structural. Parody is a more immediate, reactionary form of adaptation which we will deal with only where it initiates and leads to a more radical assimilation of style.

The context of ‘directorial style’ transcends both textual and visual, incorporates the performative, the working conditions, and even accounts for a unifying theory of filmmaking that spans careers. For the purposes of this analysis, I will limit those considerations to the visual presentation of ideas or ‘cinematographic style,’ the textual or thematic elements—most notably in translation of a screenplay into a film—or the direction of performers in a scene. I will also refer to the ‘cinematic language,’ most often in the context of Jean-Luc Godard and la Nouvelle Vague. The ‘language’ of cinema refers to the signs and signified or the way that the formal elements—images and sounds—are arranged according to some ‘grammatical’ order via editing, including

cutting, layering, voice-over, and more. At a conference held in lozan 1979 concerning the potential for cinematic research, Godard said, “An audio-visual form of criticism relies on the “capacity to compare two things, not to compare one thing with the memory one has thereof; to compare two images and, in the moment when these are seen, to indicate certain relations.”

I will be looking at two pairs of directors. Though the pairs themselves are not historically mutually exclusive or without consideration of the other—certainly there were cultural overlaps or even conflicts—the paper will largely examine two instances of an early European cinema director lending style, technique, or text to be adapted by a later American director. Subsequently, I will attempt to extract the common tools and theories of adaptation itself as employed by the two American directors. Those tools being, most primarily, the intermedial and paratextual with infrequent detours into the remedial. The academic potential in comparing the strategy of adaptation is that the process is further illuminating of the artists’ cinematic contributions and the cultural appetite. The two pairs of directors in this analysis are representative of two unique and conflicting schools of filmmaking: social filmmaking and philosophical filmmaking. Origins of both could likely be traced to the critical writings of the Cahier du Cinema and the works of early 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers who developed a scholastic framework for film analysis. The latter were largely derived from the prevailing Marxist and Deconstructivist thought most traditionally reserved for ethical, economic, or literary application.

### **Methodology**

The philosophical school of filmmakers will be represented in this paper by Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen. I will attempt to illustrate adaptational characteristics in Allen’s *Interiors* with respect to Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers*. Allen is largely adapting the themes and

characterizations of his predecessor in such a way that is present at the textual stage; however, I will show how deliberate efforts have been made by Allen, with his trusted cinematographer, Gordon Willis (who shot *Annie Hall*), to tie those thematic adaptations together more concretely in the visual landscape. In an interview conducted by Mark Kermode, Allen reveals that he was “A late teenager” when first coming across *Summer with Monika* and some other, early Bergman works, and describes them as “Clearly superior to other people’s movies.” He continues with a rather telling impression of Bergman’s films, “The fact that he’s got a mind and an intellect, and the films are about something and they’re substantive and they’re philosophical and they’re profound on a human level, that’s all great; but, he’s first and foremost an entertainer,” (Allen, 2006). This supports the notion that the influence of the Swedish director has permeated the career of the American who began as a comedian and comedic actor. The influence, however, only demonstrably transcends incidental influence and homage after Allen had found some success and refined his own techniques; for comparison, I will look at a much earlier incorporation of the Bergman pathos in a Woody Allen production. The evolutionary relationship the Allen work has with the Bergman is one which is sustained, structural, multi-modal, and thus befitting of the ‘adaptation’ classification. *Interiors* is near an academic exercise.

In contrast, Stanley Kubrick—who, together with Jean-Luc Godard account for the social filmmakers of a juxtaposed exigency in the machine of cinema—was already a working director who had found great commercial success with *Spartacus* before cultivating the central symbiosis analyzed in this paper. That is, the spirit of what is commonly understood to be Kubrick’s central artistic concerns are not as evidently present in his early output. Despite the commercial success in Hollywood as well as a suspected wealth of ancillary film knowledge, evidence would suggest that it wasn’t until the young auteur investigated a production technique of La Nouvelle Vague and

subsequently, purposefully and with some push-back, adapted that technique into the Hollywood system that Kubrick was able to develop his enduring style. This radical new version of a film that made international waves with Godard's *Breathless* seemed to precipitate the *2001 A Space Odyssey* director's disillusionment with the Hollywood format. I will primarily consider the production techniques and cinematic language which Kubrick had adapted from *Breathless* in his own adaptation of Vladimir Nabokov's seminal novel, *Lolita*, as there exists the most evidence that *Lolita* was a deliberate and labored exploration of the burgeoning European model. The method of textual adaptation itself—from novel to screen—is of peripheral concern as nearly every Kubrick film was an adaptation of a novel or short story; in fact, many Hollywood productions pre-1960's were adaptations, though, adhered to an adaptive mode which was grounded in the literal and concerned with streamlining a text of its more abstract, literary qualities: think *Frankenstein (1931)*. The films of the French New Wave were often similarly derived from novels; however, the final product somewhat revolutionarily retained the literary quality of the often-post-modern and deconstructive texts they were adapting, effectively distancing itself and the medium from the roots in theatre. This adaptational technique is one which greatly defined Kubrick's heavily abstracted, narratively ambiguous, non-linear, and surreal-adjacent storytelling which lasted for the duration of his career.

### **Note on the Directors**

Both Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Luc Godard were born to wealthy, and noteworthy, Protestant parents. Bergman's mother was a Swedish nurse; Godard's father a Swiss physician. Jean-Luc's mother was daughter of the founder of Banque Paribas (currently BNP Paribas) and granddaughter to respected theologian, Adolphe Monod. In the early 20th century, Ingmar Bergman's

father served as private minister to King Gustav V of Sweden. Each young director had his own unique experience of the second world war; Bergman was seduced by Nazism very early on before being dispelled of its ideology by the war; and the younger Godard experienced a clandestine movement between either side of Lake Geneva during the German occupation of France. Woody Allen and Stanley Kubrick were born less than six years apart in New York city. They were both raised in the Bronx and come from Jewish descent, though they similarly went on to be fairly vocal about their respective atheistic views. In fact, each director researched in this paper had at one point or another and in response to the critical reception of their body of work, reflected on an influential 'loss of faith.' Bergman perhaps most overtly deals with questions of theology within his films. Godard, though popularly adherent to Maoism, would, most cheekily, at a press junket for his most overtly religious film, *Hail Mary*, be quoted saying, "Cinema replaces the gaze of the Gods." Finally, in terms of the work, each of these directors share an active participation in 'Le politique des auteurs' or 'The politics of authors,' which is a theory of cinema in which the director is not only a managerial position, but the primary creative author of the final work. This concept need not always manifest dictatorially. Kubrick famously yearned for control; however, Allen seems simply to want the autonomy to focus on atmosphere and ideas over entertainment. Though they share this common DNA, each pair represents, whether anecdotally—as is the case with Allen V. Godard—or not, diametrically opposite ends of the spectrum which share some surface approximations with what is to be considered conservative (Bergman/Allen) or progressive (Godard/Kubrick).

## **Comparative Data**

*Bergman x Allen*

*Interiors* (1978) is a film directed by Woody Allen, which tells the story of a family torn apart by their mother's mental breakdown and subsequent suicide attempt. The film is notable for its stark, cold, minimalist aesthetic, which many critics have noted as being influenced by the films of Ingmar Bergman, particularly his 1972 film, *Cries and Whispers*. Mickey Keating called *Interiors* a “Case study in the organic growth of cinematic language and its effect of subsequent generations,” (2017) and goes on to warmly refer to the film as holding a seed of “apprenticeship” where Bergman is the master and Allen the apprentice. Other critics weren’t so kind.

However, the writer/director’s appreciation for Bergman does not begin and end with *Interiors*. In July 1968, thirty-three-year-old Woody Allen, then a burgeoning comedy writer and occasional stand-up, penned a one-act play, “Death Knocks” for *The New Yorker* in which he parodies *The Seventh Seal*. On screen, the young director was making reference to his idol as early as *Love & Death*, in which both *Wild Strawberries* and *The Seventh Seal* are comically alluded to. By *Annie Hall*, it had become clear that Allen was an intellectual comic who wanted to address philosophical themes—most clearly existentialism and even nihilism—in his work, finding great success in the juxtapositions of a deeply contemplative and neurotic ego battling a juvenile and sex crazed id. Bert Cardullo sardonically refers to Oscar winning film and its counterpart, *Manhattan* (1979), as “Seriocomic” (394) which “Entertain as they confront” what Allen considers to be “Big” ideas. In fact, in extreme retrospective, it might be reasonable suggest with some degree of objectivity that Allen is most successful when he is engaged in what might be known as tragicomedy; or, a form in which, as auteur in the European style, neither facet of his own artistic filter need be suppressed in service of either the content or style. Regardless, it seems clear to me that the common critical consensus of *Interiors*, which is poor, is not simply asserting that it is without the comedian’s right to produce a work which is wholly dramatic or wholly art-house, as

it may most readily appear, but that the work is more derivative than it is original and therefore missing an essential ingredient that makes Woody Allen films work. However, if we recontextualize the film as a work of adaptation, as is more than implied by the director when he says in his biography, “I’m not sure any American film maker makes the kind of movie I want to make. I don’t want to do films like *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Mean Streets* or *Badlands*... To me, serious American movies always have one foot in entertainment - and I like more personal drama, though there may not be a market for it. The drama I like is what you see in the plays of O’Neill and Strindberg and Ibsen - and in foreign films’ (p. 173), then effort seems more like an autodidactic film school exercise in which Allen attempts to stretch and evolve as a creator.

In a press conference regarding the funding of *Cries and Whispers*—which was, in a way, crowdfunded before crowdfunding existed—Bergman mentions that the color red was chosen for the interiors of the sisters’ childhood mansion because he always imagined that red was the color of the soul. *Interiors* then is more austere and distances with its muted earth tones and extensive greys and whites. Throughout *Whispers*, there are extensive shots which linger on a close-up; the lighting is dramatically suited to the subject’s face; and, the surrounding lighting has been almost unnaturally reduced to near blackness in such a way that isolates the face and sequesters the character. Gordon Willis adapts the distinctive proclivity for letting faces dominate a shot; however, the characters are often situated beside a window and bathed in a hot, white light. Both Agnes’s mansion and Arthur’s summer home feel like different interpretations of purgatory and, thematically, the resolution of these musings is no less bleak in the Allen than in Bergman. I reject Dan Fainaru’s claim that Allen “asked director of photography Gordon Willis to copy Sven Nykvist’s work in *Cries and Whispers*” (2). Or at least that the idea is reductive and inconsiderate of nuance. Joyce proved the merit in reassembling a form under new contexts; a “frustrated



intellectual desperately trying to assert himself,” (Fainaru 3) while facing pressures from Hollywood/television network bureaucracy is a new context onto which to project a Bergman-esque tragedy.

Allen is famously fond of Bergman’s themes and has appropriated them well outside the text of *Interiors*. The 1978 film, however, constitutes an adaptation for its “consummate marriage of technique, theatricality and themes,” to use Allen’s words as reported by Guthrie in his biography. Both films deal with similar themes of familial dysfunction, mental illness, and the search for personal identity. In *Cries and Whispers*, the three sisters struggle with their relationships to each other and to their dying sister, while in *Interiors*, the three sisters grapple with their mother's breakdown and their own individual struggles to find meaning in their lives. In *Whispers*, the house where the three sisters reside is presented as a lavish and opulent space, but one that is also sterile, claustrophobic, and suffused with a sense of death and decay. Similarly, in *Interiors*, the family's home is a minimalist and austere space, with monochromatic furniture and white walls, which reflect the characters' emotional repression and sense of disconnection from the world. In both films, the house serves as a metaphorical space that reflects the inner turmoil and emotional states of the characters. Both films feature scenes in which characters are seen reflected in mirrors or glass surfaces, which serve to underscore their sense of inner turmoil and fractured identity. Both films use a collage of the written word and journaling as a literary device—a technique later vehemently rebuked by Godard. And, both play with the orientation thereof in the frame in such a way that asks us to think differently about the familiar, mundane subjects on screen (or, perhaps more cynically, asks us to think of a Bergman film). The use of fragmented close-up shots of faces and hands highlight the characters' emotional states and physical frailty. Bergman’s film is a masterclass in intimacy; and, *Interiors*—from a man who made public habit

of drenching his dread under a slick, distanciating wit—comes off like a study in atmosphere and character that, while a pastiche and a reverent attempt by one aspiring auteur to get better at his craft by reproducing the trademark of another, *Interiors*, that is, a “Bergman-esque” text, does adapt to a new authorial voice and new context. For instance, Bergman famously uses a haunting, dissonant score composed by the legendary Swedish composer, Johann Sibelius; there is a single musical composition in *Interiors*, and it is diegetic. Allen experiments with ambient sound as he hadn’t found his voice through cinema score yet.

Both *Interiors* and *Cries and Whispers* are films that challenge conventional narrative structures and instead prioritize mood, atmosphere, and psychological depth. Both films are characterized by a deliberate slowness, a minimalism of style, and a preoccupation with the inner lives of their characters. In both cases, the films seek to create an intense and immersive experience for the viewer, one that is based on a deep exploration of the human psyche and the complexities of human relationships.

### *Godard x Kubrick*

After his frustrating experience on *Spartacus*, working faithfully from Dalton Trumbo’s screenplay, Stanley Kubrick decided to option the rights to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, less than five years after it had been published, and work with full creative control. In doing so, Kubrick created a spiritual distance between himself and the machine of Hollywood; he reassessed the entire process systemically and, having been spurred by the radical efficiency and autonomy of the French New Wave and Auteur Theory, decided to adopt a more European method of producing cinema. Before addressing any of the historical or textual evidence of this significant adjustment in director’s process, Kubrick himself telegraphed the change quite dramatically by moving his

family to Northern England in 1960 to begin work on *Lolita*. According to an interview with film critic, Derek Malcolm, the thirty-year-old director made this move for three principal reasons: to achieve a quiet environment conducive to his work, to find distance from the working conditions of Hollywood and Hollywood censors, and to secure funding for the film. Reports Malcolm, “He said that he left America because filming in Hollywood would involve their exercising some control, and he wanted no one to have control,” (1975).

The 1955 novel, *Lolita*, is a piece of modernist literature that owes its inception to the likes of Henry James and James Joyce. It exists as a swollen exercise of language and what Nabokov terms in the afterward, “aesthetic bliss,” its subject matter is a potent misdirect as any attempted derivation of a moral subtext is thwarted by the author himself. Vladimir Nabokov preemptively satirizes literary criticism and psychoanalysis, for that matter, in his mock forward penned by the fictional John Ray, Jr. Ph.D. The Russian-born writer goes on to express and summarize some of the same ideas with more sincerity in an afterward essay attributed to himself. In the afterward, Nabokov defends against conceptions of his book as obscenity (lampooning publishers in the process by claiming they stopped reading when it became clear the book wasn’t an erotic novel) as well as the idea that it might be allegorical in some anti- American way. In his clearest rebuff, the author states, “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is the sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art is the norm” (Nabokov 315). The opening lines of the novel let us know that words and language are going to be a central focus, how we experience them, how they can mislead, as it literally invites us to feel some examples, “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta” (Nabokov 9). What follows defies classical narrative in favor of flexing one of the primary muscles of modernist literature, spatial

form. The novel is a prison of subjectivity wherein we are so very rarely ever allowed even a small glimpse outside of the subjective and fancifully unreliable mind of a madman. In 2009, Brian Cox of *Succession* starred in a one man show in which he plays a Humbert who tells the story of the novel from his jail cell. The actor posited at the time that his remediation of the stream of consciousness was most accurate to the fragmented and unreliable subjectivity of the text; however, long before that, Jean-Luc Godard and his compatriots were attempting, more literally, to represent the tenets of modernist literature on celluloid. So, in this way, Kubrick's choice of a textual source and his choice of stylistic, cinematic model are in no way coincidental.

*Lolita* mirrors the deep contrast shot composition of its European predecessors and clever, complex camera work that projects as simplistic and cinema vérité-adjacent. The style is somewhat antithetical to the sensational crime noir action parodied in the pages of the book, and which Kubrick had explicit first-hand experience with on his own, *The Killing* (1956) which was a "House Style" studio production that adhered to the sensationalist formula which had been winning in the industry for over a decade. However, a more considerate consideration of the iconoclastic work of The French New Wave, and most particularly Godard and Truffaut, as a response to the post-war—and post Blum-Byrnes Agreement—influx of American culture, primarily Hollywood films, reveals *Lolita* to be an evolution of the Godard's work from a pastiche of the dominating ideas to a rebuke of them. Kubrick achieves this by creating a pastiche of his own and adapting the style of French independent films to suit his retelling of the Nabokov text. A move cemented when Kubrick quite audaciously rejected the screenplay adaptation penned by the veteran author, Nabokov, himself, in favor of his own. In many ways, the result is a perfect post-modern confluence of ideas and medias that, while not incredibly successful or even remarkable of its own merit, was a deeply seminal work from an auteur who went on to marry the independent, art-house

focus on atmosphere and images with Hollywood scale and entertainment factor to great acclaim in films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

*Lolita* is as much an adaptation of a style of filmmaking as it is a novel. Especially considering that the argument has been made that *Lolita* (1962) is not much of an adaptation (by the implied metric of fidelity) of *Lolita* (1956). Regardless, in addition to the techniques for bringing a novel to the screen, and the working conditions of director as autocrat adapted by Kubrick, the qualities by which I consider the film to be an adaptation and which are observably present in the movie itself are: a cinema verité camera style, abstraction of violence and themes, the use of heavy allusions, subversion of genre tropes, and an improvisational acting style. Furthermore, the film does away with the most conspicuous subversion of crime-thriller tropes penned by Nabokov, the climactic battle with Clare Quilty. By having the film begin in media res, with Quilty's death. The film telegraphs the conflicts and absurdity to come with one of the most brilliantly acted film openings. Kubrick has been quoted as saying "Sellers is the only actor who could truly improvise." Again, coming fresh off of the tightly scripted *Spartacus* and a period of study into a balding, bespectacled man who never even provided his actors with a script, Kubrick let the film roll on Sellers, a technique which would only fully be realized in *Dr. Strangelove*, but which could not have been possible at all had Godard not first decided to shoot films by finding a location and a "rough sketch"(Godard as recorded by MacCabe 122) of what would happen in the scene.

The most demonstrative phrase of film language applied in this movie is a shot which is used twice to book end the movie: Clare Quilty crawls away from Humbert Humbert, who has already shot him in the leg; the camera follows Sellers until his shrinking form is obscured behind a large classical portrait leaning upright against a door frame; then, pushes in on the art and all that

is shown of the antagonist's gruesome end, are the bullet holes erupting from the canvas and oil-paint visage of a young Victorian lady. The abstraction of violence. The dissonance of images, sounds, and concepts. The juxtaposition of high art and low. Finally, the rearranging and subversion of narrative structure. Kubrick emulates the experimentation of Godard to achieve an accurate representation of the literary spatial form employed by Nabokov. The subject of the portrait—a George Romney painting done of his young muse; Romney ironically went on to marry a woman named Charlotte after dismissing the muse—though most likely incidental in and of herself, is layered with allusions. Chiefly, she supplements the novel's signifier of Annabel Leigh, used to point to Poe's "Annabel Lee," that is, the symbol of obsession with image or aesthetic over individual. The shot also closely mirrors a shot from Kubrick's *The Killing* in which the character George is gunned down violently through the face. Coming minutes after Peter Sellers as Quilty quips to Humbert, "No I'm Spartacus," the entire opening of *Lolita* (including the narrative device of in-media-res) serves as a thesis and rebuke of Hollywood, sensationalist filmmaking in much the same way that the source material itself is a cheeky rebuke of cheap, "Erotic" (Nabokov 353) novels.

The first ten minutes of *A Bout De Souffle* or *Breathless* establish the same, self-conscious and frustrated relationship with cinema itself, manifested in a character who presents as a shabby parody of the Humphrey Bogart archetype and, one who is aware of this relationship. Neither James Mason nor Jean-Paul Belmond is the likely noir hero; their respective entrances portray a desperate pantomime of what their characters think the cinematic leading man is, fueled by the fundamentally flawed representation of what the characters think love is. Each opening sets up the tropes of the genres from which it steals and then pulls the rug, robbing the characters from any satisfaction or agency and simultaneously forging a contract between spectator and filmmaker that

requires the active participation and engagement with cultural attitudes. When Michel kills the cop, it is a dramatically unjustified gesture which encompasses ten seconds and five shots, none of which show the protagonist in his entirety; rather, the form is fragmented, time is rearranged, and even the out-of-sync sound design betrays him. In the murder of Quilty, Kubrick takes a cue from later in *Breathless*—the infamous bedroom scene—and Godard’s post-modern, pop-art repurposing of fine art intruding on a character study. This is a technique the French director would later perfect in *Pierrot le Fou* but was nonetheless present, in its infancy, during *Breathless*.

## **Conclusion**

### *Godard V. Allen: Dialectic Remediation*

After a fallout with his government, Ingmar Bergman returned to the theatre and a conservative life. Allen continued to refine his work (later being similarly accused of stealing from Fellini) until achieving a more original synthesis of his cinematic idols with his own comedic or philosophical identity to great success. However, he also retained a prestigious and conservative view of the cinematic experience and famously bumped heads with the radically progressive Godard over the democratization of film via video technology in the 80’s. Godard Remediates Allen in a battle of ideology in which Godard manipulates, with his famously inflammatory editing skills, a taped conversation with Woody Allen into a sort of avant garde short film, replete with title cards, dissonant soundtrack, and juxtaposed images, effectively to discredit the latter while advancing his own views on the progressive or even radical potentials of new media. The comically awkward and contentious discussion sketches out the different authorial intentions for adapting a source material directly. For progress or aesthetic. Subversion or reverence. Godard utilizes reference material from *Hannah & Her Sisters* to delineate Allan’s perhaps unintentional aping of the

conventions of television filmmaking which, Godard posits, had seeped back into the cinematic landscape. Godard remained iconoclastic in his use of media for the remainder of his career, always rejecting the synthesis of his radical upset of the form into the mainstream and instead changing once more. Kubrick retained his rebellious and progressive spirit however married it with industry and is a large contributor to developing the blockbuster as we know it today, even before *Jaws* (1976) formally did so. Kubrick can be at once regarded as arthouse and commercial and, to put it bleakly, may be largely responsible for what little artistic merit is present in mass-produced Hollywood vehicles; certainly, he paved the way for contemporary American auteurs such as Christopher Nolan. Kubrick continued to use the principles of Brechtian alienation pioneered on film by Godard and the tendency to elevate art-house style.



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