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Dossiê Henry James

Sex as a moralistic turn in the film adaptation of The Wings of the Dove

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Abstract: Sex, in act and idea, is vastly present in the work of Henry James. In the novel *The Wings of the Dove*, sexual intercourse is used as a bargaining currency between the protagonists. Its 1997 film adaptation, directed by Iain Softley, makes this exchange explicit, showing sex scenes where there were only suggestions in the book. This essay argues that the "explicitation" – a term borrowed from Translation Studies – of sex in the adaptation turns the film into more of a sentimental and moralistic narrative, in contrast with Jamesian modernism. By examining this hypothesis, it indicates that explicitation risks not only condemning a work to go from polysemy to monosemy, as warned by Antoine Berman, but to change its entire ethos.

Keywords: Film adaptation; Henry James; *The Wings of the Dove*; Explicitation

Introduction

Sex sells. It has been decades now that filmmakers are not only aware of this truism, but in full commitment to the lucrative effects of using sex scenes in their storytelling. In film adaptation, this often means displaying sexual acts that were absent or only insinuated in the source material. Iain Softley's rendering of *The Wings of the Dove*, the 1902 novel by Henry James, illustrates such occurrence. The book has suggestions of sex; its cinematic counterpart shows it.

The Wings of the Dove is part of James's set of works portraying the clash between Americans and Europeans amid the landscape of the Old World. It is considered exemplary of the author's major phase, together with *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), novels that invoke Western polarizations, such as mind versus body, and matters related to humanity's civilizing process and everything we must give up for it (Kventsel, 2007). One of the things we must give up is, of course, instinctive-like sex, driven by pure desire.

Set in London and Venice, the narrative follows Kate Croy, a pretty Londoner in difficult financial circumstances who encourages her boyfriend, penniless journalist Merton Densher, to seduce American heiress Milly Theale, a dying young woman, so that he will inherit her wealth. Milly would feel loved and joyful in her last days; Kate and Merton would be finally able to marry.

None of these happy developments take place, however. The fortune, which is in fact inherited by the end, can no longer repair such plan's effect on Kate and Merton's relationship.

Softley's film keeps to the same plot, demonstrating cinema's remarkable capacity for condensing literature, as James's novel has around 500 pages, while its audiovisual version lasts no more than 100 minutes. This adaptation is part of a Jamesian tradition in commercial cinema aimed at the consumers of "middlebrow culture" (Sadoff, 1998).[1] The attraction is obvious: intimate intrigue set in beautiful landscapes often serve as ideal material for period pieces.

Some Jamesian adaptations seem to perform explicitation – term used here in the sense adopted by Antoine Berman (1999), as it will be explained further on – of sexual content that is only insinuated in the source work. This is generally linked to the purpose of appealing to a larger audience (Sadoff, 1998). Softley's (and, quite possibly, his producers') decision to include sex scenes in *The Wings of the Dove*, released in 1997, might also have been influenced by the historical moment; the 1990s consolidated sex in commercial cinema.[2]

It is important to emphasize from the start that Softley's film does not insert random sex scenes where there were none. *The Wings of the Dove* is a sex-driven novel, as is a good part of the Jamesian literature. There is no doubt about the presence of sex in James's works:

> James is remarkably explicit about sexuality in his works, despite the highly repressive ideology of late Victorian and Edwardian societies. Although he represents a wide variety of sexual relations – heterosexual, homosocial, homosexual and lesbian, even transgender – he does so in ways that render virtually all sexual relations as unhappy. (Rowe, 2023, p. 19)

What can be argued, however, is that an adaptation like Softley's turns veiled events into palpable ones: James alludes to sex, but he does not describe it. This is not a problem *per se*, since the film is an autonomous entity (see Hutcheon, 2013) despite its inspiration on a novel. One could also argue that having sex scenes in a story that is largely about sexual bargaining is only natural. What should a contemporary film do? Stick to Victorian puritanism almost 100 years later? Perhaps not. But the following discussion examines the counterintuitive hypothesis that the insertion of sex scenes in *The Wings of the Dove* not only eliminates other potential meanings suggested by the literary work as it makes the narrative more, not less, moralistic.

With this purpose in mind, it relies on previous considerations regarding the film made by Dianne Sadoff (1998), Brenda Austin-Smith (2006) and John Carlos Rowe (2023). It also departs from the notion that James provides us with a modern narrative, in which characters and morals

[1] Among many adaptations, numerous versions of The Turn of the Screw should be remembered, with an emphasis on the celebrated The Innocents (1961), by Jack Clayton. Other important renderings are La Chambre Verte (1978), by François Truffaut, based on an ensemble of works; The Bostonians (1984), by James Ivory; The Portrait of a Lady (1996), by Jane Campion; and the update What Maisie Knew (2012), by Scott McGehee and David Siegel, among dozens of others.

[2] If, twenty years earlier, films such as Last Tango in Paris (1972), by Bernardo Bertolucci, and Empire of the Senses (1976), by Nagisa Oshima, caused certain scandal, after a period of gradual acceptance during the 1980s, in the 1990s the use of sex scenes in non-pornographic cinema became conventional (Forshaw, 2015).

are unstable and often undecipherable (Pippin, 2000; Wiltshire-Gordon, 2023). Three key narrative moments are analyzed to verify if and how the film defies such ethos.

A note on explicitation

Before the analysis, it is important to briefly address the issue of explicitation in adaptation. Adaptation is understood here in terms similar to those of literary translation, in a deliberate theoretical borrowing to try to understand this phenomenon.

In 1986, in the field of Translation Studies, linguist Shoshana Blum-Kulka (2000) tested – and confirmed – what became known as "the explicitation hypothesis", suggesting that explicitation is inherent to the translation process. A few years later, in his listing of the thirteen deforming tendencies that characterize the act of literary translation, French scholar Antoine Berman cited "explicitation" as one of the traps into which translators end up falling: "Explicitation can be the manifestation of something that is not apparent, but hidden or repressed, in the original. The translation, by its own movement, brings this element to light"[3] (Berman, 1991, p. 55). The side effect of such tendency, which is difficult to avoid, is to render clear what does not wish to be clear in the original, and to inadvertently transform polysemy into monosemy.

One can speculate that such tendency might even be more unavoidable in the process of film adaptation, because, as in literary translation, it also depends on a particular reading and interpretation of the source material, but even more so than the literary translator, the adapter must find ways to depict in audiovisual mode what is written. This brings to light elements that were only verbally described and/or left to the reader's imagination, such as characters' physical appearances and demeanors, settings, and so many other details.

In the process of adaptation, cinema is forced to materialize the abstractions of literature: what is narrated in verbal art becomes heard and seen on the screen. As Siegfried Kracauer (1997) put it, the continuum the novel evokes is mental, intellectual, abstract; in cinema, this continuum must materialize in front of the camera. This does not invalidate adaptation, however, for "the fact that a novel involves inner-life processes does not by itself alone mark it as an unadaptable narrative" (Kracauer, 1997, p. 242).

What can happen, and seems to happen frequently in adaptations, however, is that ambiguities, uncertainties, and mere suggestions contained in the source text are resolved in film concreteness. This can be a problem for the adapter of a literature that largely depends on hesitation, on its slippery and intangible character, as is the case with Flaubert and Proust – the latter often considered "unmanageable" from a cinematic point of view (Kracauer, 1997, p. 242).

[3] Translation of : « L'explicitation peut être la manifestation de quelque chose qui n'est pas apparent, mais celé ou reprimé, dans l'original. La traduction, par son propre mouvement, met au jour cet élément. »

In the case of James, whose stories and novels contain action enough to inspire plot-ridden films, the challenge seems to be not to show too much in a medium that shows by definition (Hutcheon, 2013). Excessive explanation or exhibition can nullify the purposeful blanks that make his work so provocative. A particularly sensitive aspect in this regard concerns characters' intentions and their decision-making process. In James as a whole and particularly in *The Wings of the Dove*, intentions are difficult to grasp; in an attempt to decipher them, the reader seems to experience a perpetual state of doubt. As Pippin exposes, the lack of psychological clarity in the Jamesian narrative has angered critics over time:

> Somewhat ironically, they have begun to make a virtue out of what other earlier critics found vice: first, the great elusiveness of psychological meaning, determinate intentions, or even stable identities in his characters, and second, the complex relationship between consciousness itself and power, or the thin line, in human life as he presents it, between interpreting and understanding, on the one hand, and manufacturing and imposing, on the other. (Pippin, 1999, p. 63)

There is a lot of suggestion in the novel *The Wings of the Dove*, but little can be affirmed for sure about its characters' morals and intentions. One group of hints is related to seduction and sexual relations between them. In the 1997 film adaptation, some of these suggestions come into concreteness, thus undergoing a process of explicitation, especially in some key moments of the plot: when Kate's love interest and her relationship with him are introduced in the beginning; when the couple's cunning plan is discussed in Venice; and at their imminent separation, at the end. These are the three illustrative moments that will be analyzed as it follows.

The Wings of the Dove as R-rated cinema

The Wings of the Dove is mostly a novel about manipulation, portraying a struggle "not between a working class and a leisure class, but between the 'working' and the 'worked'" (Kventsel, 2007, p. 14). Seduction and sex are part of these workings, often used as means to achieve status, money, or more sex. In this sense, it relates to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), by Choderlos de Laclos; both rely on the plotting by a *couple machiavélique* (Belot-Gondaud, 2015).

Softley's adaptation was praised upon its release as faithful to James's work and, at the same time, successful as a stand-alone film. "Few films have explored the human face this searchingly and found such complex psychological topography. That's why 'The Wings of the Dove' succeeds where virtually every other film translation of a James novel has stumbled", wrote film critic Stephen Holden to the *New York Times* in 1997. As a product, it relied on the lobbying from its producers, among them the Weinstein brothers, quite influential at the time, to collect award

nominations[4] and to attract an audience that would not necessarily be interested in a period film or in an adaptation of James. Helena Bonham-Carter, playing Kate Croy, was an emerging star.

The film was R-rated for sexuality, meaning not appropriate for younger audiences in most countries. By the second half of 1990s, the R-rating did not scare audiences away. "Studios, critics, and audiences seemed to agree through their production, favorable reviews, and attendance, respectively, that brief nudity and delicately portrayed sex lent a realist authenticity to narratives" (Pennington, 2007, p. 84). "Brief nudity" and "delicately portrayed sex" are quite fitting to the description of *The Wings of the Dove*, since its R-rated scenes would hardly be considered vulgar or out of place.

Proceeding to the three moments selected for the present analysis, the first one does not portray sexual intercourse, but it does deviate significantly from the vagueness of the source material. In the first sequence of the film, during the opening credits and to the sound of Edward Shearmur's poignant soundtrack, the viewer is transported to the London underground in the 1910's,[5] where lines of men with hats fight for space on the trains. A relatively young man (played by Linus Roache) gives up his seat to a girl in her early 20s (Bonham-Carter) while they exchange quasi-expressionless looks: this is the introduction of the main couple. The pair then take the station lift, with the camera following them up the floors in a choppy cadence of gestures: the man takes off his hat, then kisses the girl. As focused by the camera, he grabs her hip, then goes up to her breast – the young woman interrupts him abruptly (3min23sec). Viewers may wonder what the relationship between the couple really is.

This opening sequence is quite cinematic, as it certainly captures the viewer's interest. It proves to be efficient in its way of introducing the main couple, as, in just three minutes, it manages to convey a sense of passion, urgency, and, at the same time, inadequacy, which will be crucial to the unfolding of the plot. Returning to James's novel, however, one realizes how different the construction is, and how the doubts raised when Merton Densher is introduced are directed to different issues.

The book opens with a long confrontation between Kate and her father, which exposes the precariousness of her situation after her mother's death, the transfer of her little inheritance to her sister, and her potential status as a protégée of a wealthy aunt. It is only in the second chapter that her love interest is mentioned. It is Kate's sister (absent in the film) who, out of nowhere, talks about Merton Densher as a factor in Kate's current situation: "'You don't feel' — Marian brought it all out — 'as if you would like to marry Merton Densher?'" (James, 2008, p. 48). Kate responds aggressively by refusing to entertain the subject. To this reaction, the sister curiously responds:

[4] The film was nominated to four Academy Awards in 1998, including Best Actress in a Leading Role (Helena Bonham-Carter, for playing Kate Croy); Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published (script writer Hossein Amini); Best Cinematography (Eduardo Serra); Best Costume Design (Sandy Powell).
[5] The film takes place a decade after the time portrayed by the novel.

> "I talk of him just because you don't. That you never do, in spite of what I know — that's what makes me think of him. Or rather perhaps it's what makes me think of *you*. If you don›t know by this time what I hope for you, what I dream of — my attachment being what it is — it's no use my attempting to tell you." But Marian had in fact warmed to her work, and Kate was sure she had discussed Mr. Densher with the Miss Condrips. "If I name that person I suppose it's because I'm so afraid of him. If you want really to know, he fills me with terror. If you want really to know, in fact, I dislike him as much as I dread him." (James, 2008, p. 49)

In true Jamesian fashion, Merton is presented first and foremost through Marian's dismissive speech, not through Kate's, the woman who is attached to him – how much she is attached, readers will question throughout hundreds of pages.

Merton – or Mr. Densher, as he is addressed by the novel's third-person narrator (the "center of consciousness" of the novel; Bersani, 1960, p. 131) – is introduced in the context of a financial discussion, the second of the book's prologue. From Kate's point of view, her sister, like her father, dislikes him for purely economic reasons. Her sister wants her to marry Lord Mark, the suitor chosen by Aunt Maud, Kate's rich guardian. Merton is thus not presented in a romantic context, but during a money-related conflict. Kate herself seems uncertain, harboring doubts as to whether an economically advantageous marriage would not, in short, be more beneficial to her.

This return to James's novel shows how much more multifaceted Kate's departure situation is. His writing prevents readers from embracing an immediate romantic bias, as the characters themselves act hesitantly, often speaking with (perhaps false) detachment. When visited from the inside by the narrator, they always seem to be pondering on contradictory lines of action. The film, on the other hand, establishes the passion that drives the protagonists as a forceful starting point, and without them needing to say a single word. James's writing is wordy, while Softley's film has little speech – this does not mean, however, that the novel reveals more, on the contrary.

In the case of this first sequence, the meaning of explicitation is stretched, although there is an explicit element in the torrid kiss scene in the lift. There is no way of knowing if Kate and Merton would act like this in the novel, so the kissing is not an element brought into light, but one imagined by the screenwriter, Hossein Amini, and implemented by Softley on screen.

The second sequence presents a clearer case of explicitation. It marks the climax of complication, in the second act. In the novel, it is located in volume two, book eight, chapter three. In the film, it happens at the one-hour mark. In Softley's view, Venice is in Carnival – a reminder of Casanova's and Byron's sultry exploits in the city (Rowe, 2023, p. 173) – and the love triangle, now established, dances through the night streets lit by torchlight, all three in costume. Kate appears to be jealous of Merton and Milly (played by Alison Elliott), although she encourages such a relationship. On impulse, Kate captures Merton and takes him to a hidden alley, cutting through the revelers in a quick sequence, full of fast cuts to show that Milly keeps looking for them

while Kate and Merton purposefully distance themselves from her. Kate, dressed as a bullfighter, makes her pitch between feverish kisses: "This is the first time I didn't feel sorry for her. She was so happy dancing with you. I'm going to leave you alone with her". At first, Merton pretends he doesn't understand. But he soon offers his counterproposal: "And how do you love? Show me how you love". To this, Kate responds, in a sarcastic tone, "I don't understand". But she gives in to the advance, as in the next cut the camera, from a distance, in a wide shot, shows them having sex in the half light of the alley.

Contrasting with the book, the difference in tone and style is notable. While in the film their embrace takes on an urgent desperation, as if announcing a tragedy to come, by this time readers of the novel are already aware of the instability of the couple's – and everyone else's – morals and attitudes. As Wayne C. Booth (1983, p. 175) so cleverly proposed, "there can be no dramatic irony, by definition, unless the author and audience can somehow share knowledge which the characters do not hold". The knowledge that Kate and Merton do not hold, but that has already crossed the mind of the attentive reader, is that they both believe themselves smarter than they really are. Very differently from what is portrayed in the film, the tone of their negotiation is almost one of mockery:

> "You'll in the natural course have money. We shall in the natural course be free."
> "Oh, oh, oh!" Densher softly murmured.
> "Yes, yes, yes." But she broke off. "Come to Lady Wells."
> He never budged — there was too much else. "I'm to propose it then — marriage—on the spot?"
> (...)
> "Well," he said, "I'll stay, on my honour, if you'll come to me. On your honour."
>
> (James, 2008, p. 404)

In both book and film, Merton says at a point that he will only understand Kate if she understands him – this is his *quid pro quo*. In both, Kate hesitates for a moment. Through the novel's narrator, however, the reader knows what is going through Merton's mind before Kate finally promises that she will come to see him later, to be alone with him in his apartments: "He had never, he then knew, tasted, in all his relationship with her, of anything so sharp — too sharp for mere sweetness — as the vividness with which he saw himself master in the conflict" (James, 2008, p. 408). They are both players wishing to win, and the stakes in the novel seem to be less sentimental than the heartfelt exchange depicted in the film.

There is, of course, no sex scene in the novel as there is in the film – although there is no doubt either about it taking place in the novel. When we turn the page to the next chapter (book ninth), Kate is no longer in Venice and Merton seems to experience a void after her departure.

This is the most palpable case of explicitation performed by Softley's adaptation: what is told in half words in the book is in fact shown in the film.

The mention of sex is resumed by the end of the novel. As a Jamesian trick, more than 100 pages later the partially veiled sexual encounter is alluded by the narrator as "the character of their last encounter in Venice" (James, 2008, p. 527). This is in the introduction to Kate's arrival at Merton's London apartment. Milly is already dead, and he is to inherit her fortune. There is a lot of insinuation in their exchange, as they talk about the breaking of a seal (literally, of the letter about the inheritance; metaphorically, not only a sexual innuendo, but the foreshadowing of their break-up).

Another sex scene, a more explicit one, is shown in the closing moments of the film. It is shot mostly in close-ups to capture the actors' expressions, but on occasion the camera shows their position in Merton's bed through wider framing. Their exchange is distant and sad. Kate feels that things have changed irrevocably, and that their staying together is made impossible by Milly's persistence in Merton's memory and feelings. The entire sequence borders melodrama: Kate meticulously removes all her clothes and lies on the bed while Merton watches her; they rock each other, in an attempt of mutual comfort, lulled by the sound of rain on the bedroom window: "They are simply pale ghosts going through the motions" (Rowe, 2023, p. 175).

During sexual intercourse, Kate cries over her lover, with her face turned towards the window, as if avoiding the truth of the situation. Finally, in close-up, we see her frightened expression, with tears running from her eyes, when she says: "Give me your word of honor. Your word of honor that you're not in love with her memory" (1h36min). The camera then zooms in on Merton's face, who appears in shock, his eyes wide, as if recognizing the end of their affair. A sequence of flashbacks shows us what is going on in his mind: Milly alive, happy in Venice. Both these devices, the flashback and the close-up to enhance the actors' emotions, are quite cinematic and obviously contribute to the storytelling. On the other hand, it can be argued that the redundancy of elements contributes to direct viewers toward one sole interpretation: Merton is indeed in love with Milly's memory, which is a tragic turn to his love with Kate. In the very last scene, Merton returns alone to Venice.

The last pages of James's long novel are much more ambiguous. The couple's conversation in Merton's apartment borders on cynicism throughout, and although the question of the memories about Milly is present, there is little to no sentimentality. It is Kate's action that closes the novel: "But she turned to the door, and her grasp was now the end. 'We shall never be again as we were!'" (James, 2008, p. 533).

A moralistic turn

In addition to the moments analyzed above, Softley's film is full of kisses and physical contact in general, as well as various references to sex. Kate and Merton kiss passionately in the rain in the park (8min); Kate and Milly look at a pornographic image in the public library (21min40sec); Lord Mark mocks Kate's "corruption" (22min); Lord Mark approaches Kate in her bed (33min15sec); Milly and Kate share a bed (35min42sec); Milly kisses Merton in a Venetian church (1h14min35sec). James's novel, in turn, barely portrays any physical contact at all.

The explicitation of hidden sexual acts that were concealed in the novel and even the invention of new acts did not bother film critics:

> The choice of the filmmakers to emphasize the erotic in their adaptation of James is a particularly astute one, as the almost comically responsive language of reviewers attests. Kenneth Turan, writing in the Los Angeles Times, refers to the film as a "stripped-down version of James," while James Bernardinelli's web review describes Helena Bonham Carter's "emotionally naked" performance as Kate Croy. In the San Francisco Chronicle, Edward Guthmann calls director Softley and screenwriter Amini "keen observers who bring a wealth of ambiguity and mystery to the surface" in their rendering of James's novel. **The comments are intriguing in that they repeatedly praise the filmmakers for acts of uncovering, revealing, or laying bare what is always characterized as hidden, latent, or buried in James's original story.** (Austin-Smith, 2006, p. 332; my emphasis)

The last part of Brenda Austin-Smith's comment points to the question problematized here: why would bringing to light what is hidden in a novel be a good thing? Do critics not realize the potential for reducing meaning, or even of trivializing, by "stripping-down" a complex literary work? As seen, the explicitation performed in *The Wings of the Dove* resolves ambiguities, the most important of them the ending, which is turned into a redemptive one (at least for Merton) instead of the open denouement of the novel.

As exposed by Berman (1999), the side effect of explicitation is that it eliminates meanings; by bringing one to light, other latent ones are buried. As a way of demonstrating this, the elimination of at least one other possible interpretation – the modernist element of moral doubt – is examined below. This does not mean that it is a preferable or more correct reading than the one chosen by the filmmakers, but simply one of the many possible readings that the film does not allow to develop.

As the film "strips-down" the novel by enhancing sexual and romantic aspects, it closes the door to the interpretation that Kate and Merton's circumstances might have little to do with romance and are simply exemplary of the modern difficulty of navigating life in uncertainty; as Pippin (1999, p.178) reminds, "nothing is ever settled". Throughout the text, Kate and Merton's relationship is traversed by moral conflicts. Even after the partial success of their plan (after all, the heiress did leave them her money), they remain individuals in doubt.

As Koch (1966) argues, James's *The Wings of the Dove* is a modern figuration of the tragic. As the main couple become aware of the futility of their plan, each in their own conscience, the novel reveals itself as a modern take on the search for individuality and agency. Although characters are faced with ethical dilemmas, the narrative is not moralistic in the sense of expressing a clear message about how these characters should or should not act:

> Yet it is one of the most extraordinary achievements of this book that one finishes it without hating either Kate or Densher, despite what they have done. Though every page rests in an ethical frame, one reads without a trace of moralistic feeling. This is partly because James managed to avoid the pathos of the "act of dying" that threatened to deluge the novel in its earliest stages. With it, that orgy of moralistic ressentiment invariably arising in every conventional novel of pathos on behalf of the weak, innocent, helpless victim was bypassed. (Koch, 1966, p. 102)

While the film re-creates Kate and Merton's ambiguity, it fails to expose Milly as a mere object of their plotting. It humanizes her, bringing her back after death in a sentimental flashback. In doing so, it enhances the motif of tragic love. In fact, some critics have argued that a major difference between novel and film is the sanctification of Milly, who, in contrast to the cunning Kate (representing Europe's decay) seems to embody what United States intend to be to the world: the antidote to immorality. "Milly's task in the film is to instruct and discipline Merton while purging the force of the threatening New Woman, Kate, who is associated with our worst modern tendencies", states Rowe (2023, p. 170). In the novel, Milly is also "ethereal" (Koch, 1966, p. 95) and treated with special care, as James himself justified in preface to the novel, but she is much less active and savior-like: "In Softley's *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly is aestheticized and spiritualized far beyond James's representation of her in the novel, and the otherwise normal sexual desires of Kate and Merton are transformed in the film into symptoms of modern corruption" (Rowe, 2023, p. 181).

By placing the "corruption" of the main couple in contrast to the childlike innocence so empathetically portrayed by Milly, Softley's film fails to embrace Jamesian modernism (and cynicism). Even though it is set in the 1910s and exhibits sex in a somewhat bold manner, the film seems more engaged in 19th century's Victorian sensibilities than in the instability post-psychoanalysis, post-rise of bourgeoisie of pre-war Europe. From kissing in the rain to the wandering through Venetian labyrinthic streets, which serve as background to the demise of a virginal young woman, the film alludes to the romantic and the gothic.

Therefore, the paradox found here is that the explicitation of sex does not make the film more liberal, or even more modern in tone, but precisely the opposite: it makes it more judgmental and moralistic than the novel will ever be. The sex acts performed by Kate and Merton contribute to the judging of their reprehensible characters, creating an opposition between Milly's sweetness and true capacity for love versus their selfish, passion-driven, making-love-at-a-dark-alley behavior.

Even though it is undeniably a moral tale, James's book does not invite this sort of judgement. It does not resolve any moral problem, neither provides readers with cathartic relief in the end. Most importantly, it does not condemn Kate as the film does.[6]

The power of James's novel, and the anguish provoked by it, resides in the fact that neither readers nor characters know exactly where to stand: "Where do these characters stand morally? It's a question they themselves are asking: have I done enough to fall on the right side of the divide while also pursuing my own self-interest?" (Wiltshire-Gordon, 2023, p. 133). Individualist as they are, each one a survivor in the jungle of falsehoods in which they live, Kate and Merton themselves do not understand each other. Moreover, they are conscious of their lack of knowledge. In the scene of the plotting against Milly, when asked by Merton how she could even bear it, Kate responds: "Well, when you know me better you'll find out how much I can bear" (James, 2008, p. 405).

The modern ethos of James's novel is one of uncertainty. "James and his fellow modernists unsettle any pretense that care for others or acting well in the world could distill into a prescriptive course of action or moral certainty" (Wiltshire-Gordon, 2023, p. 134). The film changes such ethos: through explicitation, it focuses on sex and romance and provides a redemptive, resolute ending; consequently, the whole moral nature (and feel) of the narrative is changed.

From a commercial perspective, nevertheless, the ending of the film seems to work better:

> In *Wings*, however, the beautiful celebrity lovers have sex; the spectator, who has yearned to see Helena Bonham Carter naked, takes pleasure in viewing her fleshy body and imagining its orgasmic delight, even as he or she recognizes the limitations of film sex and the thematized failures of heterosexual coupling. (Sadoff, 1998, p. 294)

Besides the matter of sexploitation, which may arouse the audience's voyeurism more than encourage their reflective capacity, there is the important issue of Kate's final attitude. In the film, Kate becomes a victim of her own immorality, while Merton, now in love with the memory of Milly, seems to have his sentence alleviated by redemptively moving back to Venice. In the novel, Kate is initially victimized by Merton's cruelty when he suggests that they should marry without Milly's money (thus insinuating himself as the one with the higher morals), but she counter-reacts. Kate is the one who puts the final point, in a demonstration of agency and refusal to be dominated, as a herald of the 20th century way of being.

Final remarks

By borrowing a hypothesis from the domain of Translation Studies, that of explicitation as a tendency in the act of translation/adaptation, this essay presented a case in which this

[6] In its treatment of Kate, the film also seems less feminist-oriented than the book written almost 100 years prior.

phenomenon generates a side effect: the elimination of potential meanings of a literary work when it is adapted into film.

It was demonstrated that one of the possible interpretations of the novel *The Wings of the Dove* – that of the moral uncertainty of the modern person, vastly explored by Jamesian critics – is virtually erased in its 1997 film adaptation, in favor of an emphasis on the romantic and sexual aspect of the story. While these two different interpretations, and many possible others, compete in the polysemic reading of Henry James' work, the same process cannot be generated by the film, because, by performing constant explicitation and by eliminating the ambiguity of the ending, it tends towards monosemy.

Particularly, the insertion of creative sex scenes directs the way we understand the characters and judge them, closing doors to other potential impressions. Besides, one could expect that, by exposing the sex relations between the characters, a film adaptation of a novel would invite to a more liberal take on it. The opposite seems to take place in Softley's *The Wings of the Dove*, which is arguably quite moralistic, while its source, the Jamesian novel, is not.

What matters the most in these perceptions is not so much the lack of faithfulness of the film in relation to its source, but why and how this deviation is performed. Part of it is evidently thanks to the interpretation and artistic choices of the filmmakers. There may be another part, however, that is simply unavoidable; after all, authors like Blum-Kulka and Berman argued that it is difficult, if not impossible, escaping the trap of explicitation in the act of translating (or adapting, as it is appropriated here). In this equation, one should consider that cinema, as a materializing medium that shows (more than it tells, as proposed by Hutcheon), tends towards palpable drama. This tendency may have a solid impact on the adaptation of an author whose artistry depends on instability, ambiguity, and strategic placed blanks, such as James.

Many questions can be derived from such insight. Would the translation/adaptation be destined to eliminate latent interpretations present in the original literary work? Maybe not, but the issue certainly deserves further investigation and deepening.

The autonomy of adaptation in relation to the source material, convincingly defended by Hutcheon and others in the field of Adaptation Studies, does not appease such problematization. Seeing it as an autonomous work does not prevent us from observing in it the phenomenon of explicitation and its consequent reduction of meanings, which fatally reinforces the idea that reading the novel is more intellectually edifying and should not be replaced by the seeing of a film adaptation, even when it tells the same story.

Future studies may amplify the understanding of explicitation in adaptations of James, as well as of other authors who, once adapted, may seem to have their nuances effaced and their ethos, changed.

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