

Julia Brühne /
Gabriella Campos Mendes (eds.)

Transfictional and Transgeneric

Lingering Figures and Wandering Genres
in Literature and Film
of the 20th and 21st centuries



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Everything Becomes What We Choose to Invent. The Cinematization of *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

Introduction: intermediality in Saramago

Some texts are so profoundly intertwined with their reception that the lines between original production and later interpretations become blurred. A significant example of this phenomenon is the Bible, whose reception has long been inseparable from its original narrative, and this extends well beyond its process of composition, closure, and canonization. Over centuries of biblical reception, an accumulation of references has layered itself upon the original set of ancient and foreign accounts, which, embraced by the West, have taken on new forms through diverse readings, expansions, and representations.

Consider, for example, the secondary characters, plots, and narrative details introduced by the apocryphal texts. Similarly, paintings have not only given form and substance to biblical characters but have also created them, imbuing them with characteristics and emotions that have become inseparable from their identities. These depictions have reshaped their narrative significance — think of the compassion and suffering of Jesus' mother or the seductive beauty of Mary Magdalene. More recently, cinema has contributed to solidifying the image of Jesus, aligning with painting while also crafting its own cinematic version: we are now accustomed to a bearded cinematic Jesus,¹ but also white and blue-eyed.

Today, the Bible is perhaps better known for the many paintings, illustrations, and adaptations it has inspired than for the actual texts from which they originated. The important caveat here lies in the creative cycle: a painting of Jesus will rarely be constructed solely from the biblical narrative. Rather, it will be shaped in dialogue with a rich iconographic tradition that precedes it. Similarly, if a novel about the Gospels can disregard other writings of the same genre and try to stick to the biblical text, it will hardly be able or want to remain immune to a whole universe of references that adds to and complements the Gospel narratives. The novel under examination in this study, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), by José Saramago, falls into

1 Philip Kerr: Heavenly creatures, in: *New Statesman*, 21.4.2003, p. 44.

the category of works that have openly, and often provocatively, engaged with this reception.

A closer examination of this dialogue reveals that it is not limited to the textual realm. Other media intervene throughout the novel, in explicit and implicit references, lending their narratives and characters, but also colors, sounds and ways of representing the world. This makes it relevant to approach the work through the lens of intermediality, which can be defined as "any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media"².

Although there have been critical texts discussing the explicit reference in the case of the engraving attributed to Albrecht Dürer, described in the novel's first chapter, the broader concept of intermediality in *The Gospel* has not yet received focused scholarly attention.³ While few studies have addressed the subject in depth, it is clear that, for at least one reader, the novel's media influences have not gone unnoticed.

A few years after the novel's release, a reader sent a letter to Saramago, expressing vehement dislike for both the book and its author. The controversies surrounding the novel's publication are well-documented,⁴ and among the letters Saramago transcribed in *Cadernos de Lanzarote [Notebooks of Lanzarote]*, this one stands out for its length, aggression, and even threats. It expresses, in a tone characteristic of the genre, nostalgia for the days of the Inquisition. The letter can, however, be read beyond its venom, since it reveals the extent to which the intermediality of the novel fulfills a certain function, drawing attention, for example, to the fictionality of the narrative — in a game of references to a canonical intertext — and thereby disturbing the reader. Referring to the moment when, after his encounter with God and the Devil, Jesus is welcomed by the disciples and a crowd, the reader, named Maria, says:

With St. Peter, you made a fuss on the boat; he appears shouting to those on shore that Jesus was the Son of God, staging and posing as if there were a television set on the shore of the lake to film Jesus' arrival. Only Peter speaks, all that was missing

2 Werner Wolf: (Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature, in: CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13 (2011), p. 3.

3 This essay constitutes an adapted and translated version of a part of my doctoral thesis, which included the study of intermediality in Saramago's works, with an emphasis on the novels *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984) and *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. Cf. Sara Grünhagen: A cor dos cabelos de Deus: intertextualidade, intermedialidade e metalepse em José Saramago, Paris/Coimbra 2021, pp. 273-285. In this work, the novel being studied will be referred to by its abbreviated form, *The Gospel*.

4 The history of the reception of the novel is further explored in *ibid.*, pp. 156-166.

was the make-up and Portuguese TV. You really have a hollow brain. St. Peter only learned that Jesus was the Son of God at the Transfiguration, and that, through the Divine Holy Spirit.⁵

Whether or not Maria fully grasps that the novel is fictional, she is not mistaken about the theatrical and cinematic construction of the scene. The episode is deliberately staged: there is fanfare, a large crowd, dramatic dialogues, comic outbursts, vibrant shouts, commotion, and even an elaboration like that of a point-of-view shot that moves closer to the shore, the people and the emotions through Jesus' eyes. Even the disciples seem to understand the need for staging; they seek to create an effect, and the Son of God is placed "standing on the boat's prow in his worn tunic and with his empty knapsack over his shoulder, his arms half-raised as if he were about to greet someone or bestow his blessing."⁶

The Gospel contains numerous borrowings and recreations of tools, motifs, and effects from other media. However, I do not want to fall into the same trap as the aforementioned reader, even if I am going in the opposite direction: intermediality does not possess intrinsic value, and the concept should not merely be used as a catchphrase or empty compliment. Wolf addresses this risk when analyzing the musicalization of fiction: "musical metaphors, instead of being used for heuristic purposes, frequently only serve the purpose of laudatory ornaments of a critical discourse."⁷ There is praise that can be justified, but the essential point is that intermediality contributes to the complexity of *The Gospel*, and the aim of this essay will be to demonstrate this in order to affirm it.

5 "S. Pedro, tu fizestes [sic] um alarde, na barca aos brados para os que estavam em terra que Jesus era o Filho de Deus, fazendo encenação e pose, como se à beira do lago estivesse a televisão para filmar a chegada de Jesus, só Pedro falava, só faltou colocar a maquiagem e a TV portuguesa presente. Tens mesmo o cérebro oco. S. Pedro só soube que Jesus era Filho de Deus na Transfiguração, e isso por intermédio do Divino Espírito Santo". José Saramago: *Cadernos de Lanzarote: diário V*, 2nd ed., Lisbon 1998, p. 104. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

6 José Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, translated by Giovanni Pontiero, London 1993, p. 303.

7 Werner Wolf: *The Musicalization of Fiction: a Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality*, Amsterdam 1999, p. 71.

The cinematization of fiction

The Gospel's dialogue with various forms of iconography may seem more obvious, due to the presence of an engraving of the Crucifixion at the beginning of the book, but this is not the only medium with which the novel programmatically engages. It also emulates the resources of other arts, appropriates their motifs and genres, and borrows attributes that transform its fictional material.

Saramago, like other writers, was not indifferent to the art that took shape and rose to prominence in the 20th century, an art that, while initially dependent on others, soon established its own rules and distinctive mode of storytelling. That art is cinema, with all the characteristics that came to consolidate it as a unique creative form: its technological nature, the industry and the collective production process it involves, its stitching together of space and time, its illusion of movement, and its potential, in short, to fabricate worlds and dreams.

Yet, even after more than a century of film productions with an undeniable impact on culture and our ways of seeing the world, criticism still tends to focus primarily on how cinema draws on literature, theatre, music, painting, architecture, and so on. There is no doubt about this, but the opposite is also true: cinema is equally influential, and literature written in the 20th century inevitably reveals traces of its impact. Perhaps part of what makes this literature distinct from earlier traditions is precisely the marks left by cinema: its fondness for metalepsis, its extreme exploration of the boundaries of fiction, and other resources closely associated with postmodernism.

This remains a relatively barren and underexplored field in literary studies, although intermedia studies have started to change the landscape. When it comes to Saramago and *The Gospel* specifically, the panorama remains bleak. While critical studies often mention films about the life of Christ — particularly those that have sparked controversy⁸ — it has yet to be properly analyzed whether the novel actively establishes a dialogue with the seventh art.

Even when there are no explicit allusions to specific films, cinema is deeply present in Saramago's narrative constructions. I would argue that intermediality is a constant in his body of work, and the dialogue with cinema exemplifies this stylistic trait. It is not always a matter of identifiable references, but the

8 See, for example, Ferraz, who provides a list of these films. Salma Ferraz: O quinto evangelista: o (des)evangelho segundo José Saramago, Brasília 1998, pp. 19-24.

novel adopts elements characteristic of other media, and it is in this sense that we shall speak here of cinematic effects.

To better illustrate the evocation and imitation of cinematic effects in *The Gospel*, two films and directors have been selected as paradigmatic examples: Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Both films adapt novels — faithfully in some ways, but also creatively, exploiting the specific resources of the cinematic medium. Bertolucci adapted Paul Bowles' 1949 novel of the same name, and Scorsese, Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation* (1955). Bertolucci and Scorsese intervene here as paradigmatic names of auteur cinema, producing in different contexts with diverse aesthetic results, and thus offering distinct models of cinematographic dialogue. On one hand, the desert and the sky in Bertolucci's film help us think about the staging in *The Gospel*, whose treatment of space and time can be compared to the Italian director's style, marked by a characteristic cadence and atmosphere, "with diffuse lighting, warm colours, and a relaxed rhythm interrupted by explosions of violent intensity".⁹

On another level, Scorsese's film can be thematically compared with Saragamo's narrative, and perhaps even enters into direct dialogue with it, as will be discussed. Scorsese is also invoked because he is more directly associated with Hollywood cinema — albeit a reformed one ("New Hollywood") — being both mainstream and at the same time something of an outlier, with a long career that embodies both the rules and exceptions of the industry. Many of his films follow a recognizable commercial playbook but simultaneously reveal distinctive directorial choices. In Scorsese's filmography, *The Last Temptation of Christ* stands out less for its themes than for the context of its production and reception, marked by enormous difficulties and a limited budget.¹⁰ In short, this film also reveals what makes Scorsese, Scorsese.

The mainstream is crucial when it comes to the cinematic influence on other arts because of its massive reach, constituting a significant reservoir of references. The cinematization of fiction, in order to have an effect and to echo the cinematic medium, will most likely draw on the aesthetics of this kind of cinema, characterized by its emphasis on movement, its valuing of a

9 Morando Morandini: Bernardo Bertolucci, in: Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey (ed.): *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Oxford 1996, p. 593.

10 Or a detailed analysis of the controversies involved since pre-production, see Thomas R. Lindlof: *Hollywood under Siege: Martin Scorsese, The Religious Right, and The Culture Wars*, Lexington 2008.

certain realism, and its simultaneous fondness for special effects, among other elements.

Outside of specialized contexts, and owing to Hollywood's overwhelming dominance in global film production and distribution, references to "cinema" generally mean Hollywood cinema rather than other traditions, many of which emerged in opposition to the Hollywood norm: Italian neorealism and Rossellini's documentary project; the *Nouvelle Vague*, with Godard's characteristic gaps and cuts; or non-Western traditions like Japanese cinema and Kurosawa's aesthetics. Although these movements have also influenced Hollywood — Scorsese being a prime example — the predominant cultural reservoir remains the universe of the California studios. In this sense, whether he liked it or not, Saramago's cinematographic imagination was somewhat Hollywoodian, despite his frequent critiques. Reporting on a speech he gave at a cinema seminar, Saramago protests, among other things, "against the so-called 'special effects' that will end up killing our imagination".¹¹ Yet the much-maligned effects, encompassing a wide range of cinematographic techniques, were not so damaging to 20th-century literature: quite the contrary, they often enriched it, and Saramago's fiction attests to this. I would even venture to suggest that certain special effects may have taught us to imagine other things, or at least to imagine differently.

Take, for instance, the episode in which Jesus meets Mary Magdalene for the first time. She walks like a movie diva, step by step drawing closer to her future lover until she fills the frame:

Jesus saw her approach but unless his eyes were deceiving him, she was walking very slowly, as sometimes happens in dreams, her tunic flowing and revealing the curves of her body as she advanced, her hips swaying, her black tresses hanging loose over her shoulders and tossing like ears of corn in the wind.¹²

In this brunette Marilyn Monroe figure, appearing with flowing robe and hair, we find echoes of Bertolucci's "subjective camerawork,"¹³ framing the scene from Jesus' point of view, and also of directors like Scorsese, who often use slow motion to express subjective perception and seduction — recall, for instance, the suggestion that time and the city slow down when Travis (Robert de Niro) sees Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) for the first time in *Taxi Driver* (1976).

11 "Contra os denominados 'efeitos especiais' que acabarão por nos matar a imaginação". Saramago: Cadernos de Lanzarote: diário V, p. 142.

12 Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, p. 210.

13 Ian Aitken: *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh 2001, pp. 240-241.

To justify this breathtaking vision, *The Gospel* draws a parallel with dreams, whose realization in images, as we know, made Hollywood famous.¹⁴ We should ask ourselves once again if the movement of influences has changed: is it dreams that create films, or have films taught us new ways of dreaming, even suggesting sequences in slow motion? In a verse by none other than Alberto Caeiro about a crucial medium for cinema, Pessoa had already intuited the reach that a technique and an art can have on our imagination: "I had a dream like a photograph / I saw Jesus Christ come down to earth".¹⁵ Photography and cinema have taught us, for example, to think in terms of framing. Painting and literature, with their well-established techniques of composition and focus — widely reused, unashamedly, by cinema — may have benefited from the reference established by this other angle of vision promoted by younger arts.

It is worth recalling that one of the hallmarks of cinema as we know it today is the emotive close-up, a tight framing that foregrounds feelings, typically by isolating a distressed face.¹⁶ The unforgettable shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Robert Bloch (1959), is a classic example: we see Marion Crane's (Janet Leigh's) terrified face, then only her screaming mouth filling the frame. Similarly, Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* uses frequent close-ups of Jesus' (Willem Dafoe's) face, where we see doubt, fear, anger, desire, contempt, and ultimately relief. Saramago, for his part, uses words to create a close-up effect, such as when the narrator describes Joseph's face while listening to the account of Herod's funeral procession:

Bitter experience had made the carpenter much more sensitive to this particular chord on the harp. One only had to look at him and examine that face. One thing was his composure when he tried to conceal his youth by looking solemn and thoughtful, another was the expression of bitterness which has marked him with lines deeper than open scars. But what is really disturbing about Joseph's face are those eyes which look dull and expressionless except for a tiny gleam inflamed by insomnia.¹⁷

The narrator's gaze lingers like a camera, simultaneously tracing José's wrinkles and emotions, making use of a cinematic technique that characteristically

14 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith: *The History of Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2017, p. 95.

15 "Tive um sonho como uma photographia / Vi Jesus Christo descer á terra." Fernando Pessoa: *Obra completa de Alberto Caeiro*, ed. Jerónimo Pizarro and Patricio Ferrari, Rio de Janeiro 2018, p. 41.

16 Nowell-Smith: *The History of Cinema*, pp. 54, 94.

17 Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, p. 88.

shows an emotional state and associates it with the diegetic action. This kind of slow shot aligns with the rhythm of Saramago's narratives, paced by the narrator's comments. Yet there are also fast shots, such as when Jesus seems overwhelmed by memories, projected onto the text as a rapid sequence of frames. The narrative list intervenes in such a way as to recreate a fast-motion flashback effect, made iconic by cinema:

As if he were lifting a long, heavy chain made of iron from the ground, Jesus recalled his life so far, link by link, the mysterious annunciation of his conception, the luminous earth, his birth in the cave, the massacred innocents of Bethlehem, his father's crucifixion, these nightmares he had inherited, the flight from home, the debate in the Temple, the revelations of Salome, the appearance of the shepherd, his experiences with the flock, the rescued lamb, the desert, the dead sheep, God.¹⁸

A second flashback can also be read in the final lines of the book, once again constructed using the close-up framing. As Jesus lies on the cross, the narrator dwells successively on the nails and the martyred body, in a rapid sequence that intensifies the effect of the proposed narrative superimposition. The scene is cinematic — and terrible:

Ordering Jesus to lie down, the soldiers extended his arms on the transom. As they hammered the first nail in, perforating the flesh of his wrist between two bones, sudden vertigo sent time into reverse, and Jesus felt the pain as his father had felt it before him, saw himself as he had seen him on the cross at Sepphoris. Then they drove a nail into his other wrist and he experienced that first tearing of stretched flesh as the soldiers started to hoist the transom in stages to the top of the cross, Jesus's entire weight suspended from fragile bone, and it was almost a relief when they pushed his legs upwards and hammered another nail through his heels, now there is nothing more to be done except await death.¹⁹

The Gospel is thus marked by examples of what I have been calling the cinematization of fiction, an expression meant to echo the previously mentioned musicalization of fiction in Wolf's work.²⁰ Far beyond the adaptation of a film into a book or play, what is at stake here is a narrative process of implicit intermedial reference that involves the systematic evocation and recreation of effects and aesthetics specific to cinema — effects created, explored, or transformed by it. Some of these devices may be present in or even originate from other arts, such as theatre or literature itself. However, a narrative becomes cinematized when it makes marked use of elements that have become

18 Ibid., p. 203.

19 Ibid., pp. 340-341.

20 Wolf: *The Musicalization of Fiction*, passim.

inescapable features of cinematic language, such as close-up, slow motion, or fast motion.

If, in past centuries, novels already dwelled on traits of their characters, and if plays could already experiment with a certain slowing down or speeding up of actors' movements — walking very slowly or running, as in a dream —, today these effects will inevitably be associated with cinema, which established them as techniques through camera manipulation, through changes in the standard frame rate per second, through the way it effectively created new ways of seeing and moving. This process of intermedial narrative composition, although by no means rare, given the undeniable cultural penetration of cinema worldwide, still lacks dedicated studies and theorization.

Saramago and Scorsese

As this work insists on analyzing the cinematization of *The Gospel*, it is worth pointing out that the dialogue between this novel and cinema, or at least with one film in particular, may be more direct than has previously been suggested whenever this comparison has been made. It is quite likely that Scorsese's Hollywood style resonates within it on more than one level.

In addition to the technical effects, there are noteworthy narrative coincidences between the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Saramago's *The Gospel*, starting with the love scene between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. If there is any dialogue in this case, it is not with Kazantzakis: Scorsese's signature is already noticeable in certain choices and emphases, marked, for instance, by a considerable amount of sex and blood. Jesus is thus crucified in the movie with all the violence and agony that such an event implies, and when he comes down from the cross, in the long dream sequence that is only revealed as such at the end, he carries with him the wounds and blood of his martyrdom. It is in this state that he meets Mary Magdalene, and not as a man suddenly transformed into a prince, sitting on a white horse and wearing royal garments.²¹ In the film, Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey) has black hair — as in Kazantzakis' book — and, before their union is consummated, she cleans Jesus' wounds (Willem Dafoe) in a context of intimacy that foreshadows what will follow: a brief, but explicit and erotic love scene. In the corresponding episode of Saramago's novel — that is, the arrival of the wounded Jesus,

21 Nikos Kazantzakis: *The Last Temptation of Christ*, translated by P. A. Bien, New York 1968, p. 438.

Mary's gestures in cleaning him, and the subsequent love scene — there is more sex and less blood, but the latter also plays a significant role throughout the narrative, reinforcing the possibility of a connection with Scorsese.

Throughout *The Last Temptation of Christ*, dead animals and blood appear frequently, in various contexts, becoming almost part of the landscape: the episode of the Wedding at Cana, for example, is introduced with the image of a goat being disemboweled amidst the joyful singing and clapping of the celebration. The Temple is particularly red, in the smoke surrounding a statue of Caesar, in the way the elements of the sacrifices performed there are placed in the foreground. At one point, even before Jesus and his disciples enter those spaces, a man passes in front of them carrying a handful of bloody goat heads on a stick. Jesus' first visit to the Temple in the film corresponds to the episode of the expulsion of the money changers: we see various scenes of commerce, including prostitution, we hear bleating and mooing, and then the camera follows the blood that flows copiously down a gutter next to a staircase, eventually falling into a drain where dogs gather to lick it. Kazantzakis also mentions the blood of the Temple,²² but the framing of the staircase is specific to Scorsese's film. In *The Gospel*, the teenage Jesus, when he gives up sacrificing his lamb, has a vision and an experience that seem straight out of a movie:

For a moment, fear of punishment made him hesitate, but suddenly in his mind's eye, he momentarily saw the horrifying vision of a vast sea of blood [...]. These thoughts were so disturbing that he imagined he saw the steps of the Temple awash with red, blood streaming down the steps [...]. Deep in thought, Jesus seemed to be trapped inside a sphere of silence, but suddenly the sphere exploded, shattered into pieces and once more he was plunged into that clamour of invocations and blessings, pleas, cries, chanting and the pitiful bleating of lambs.²³

The excerpt uses a sound effect typical of cinema: the diegetic sound is cut off, the action continues, but the character hears nothing, until suddenly everything returns to normal. Scorsese is a director known for frequently exploring the technique of subjective sound, making us hear what only the character hears or imagines, including silence. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, this "bubble" effect appears, for example, in the scene of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (Andre Gregory), when the latter, after asking if Jesus is

22 "The wide courtyards of the Temple overflowed with blood", "the blood-sprinkled paving stones" (ibid., pp. 223, 357).

23 Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, pp. 187-188.

the Messiah, looks around, sees the movement of people singing and dancing frantically, but hears nothing — and, like him, neither do we.

Even more striking is the soundscape and its interruption during the crucifixion of Jesus: the sound of the wind and thunder, the uproar of the entire crowd, suddenly all falls silent. The exalted gestures of the people are visible, but their voices are not heard, and at that moment Jesus spots what would be his guardian angel and comes down from the cross with his help, surrounded by silence.

The comparison between Scorsese's film and Saramago's book can be made on several other points, whether or not through Kazantzakis. One might also mention the episode of the public confrontation between Jesus and the High Priest in the Temple, which, although not biblical, functions similarly in both narratives. The narrator humorously remarks on the possibility of either voice being audible in that context: there was "such an uproar that [Jesus'] words would never have been heard except for the fact that his natural voice rang out in stentorian tones, railing," and also the High Priest, "at the top of the stairs," as in the movie, speaks with "a voice powerful enough to match that of Jesus."²⁴

Some structuring elements of the three works stand out. Both the books and the film have scenes of crucifixion at the beginning and the end, even though they use different elements to construct them. Interestingly, the two Jesuses in question are, for a period, accompanied by the Devil disguised as an angel, characters that are quite different but serve similar functions, showing the Son of God that the earth is better than heaven.

In short, Saramago and Scorsese align in the way they present both an alternative history and a hero who is unconvinced of his mission and has an enormous desire to escape it. Only at the end, in both cases, the narrative is placed back on the canonical tracks. This marks a difference from Kazantzakis, who announces in the prologue that the last temptation of the title will be a brief vision, duly repelled by Christ. Although the first sentences of Kazantzakis' prologue about the struggle between flesh and spirit appear at the beginning of Scorsese's film, we only learn in the final moments that a lifetime of temptation might have been just a dream — or not, and in the end, Jesus could have had the best of both worlds, living as a man and dying as a god? What is certain is that, in the end, Jesus reappears on the cross, and the sound of that scene suspended thirty minutes earlier returns.

24 Ibid., pp. 325-326.

At the time of *The Gospel's* release, there were several references to a possible dialogue with Kazantzakis.²⁵ In fact, the recurring question from interviewers had to do with intertextuality: "Did you do a lot of reading to write this book?"²⁶ As far as it could be verified, no one asked directly about Scorsese — or even about other films — although *The Last Temptation of Christ* had been released, with much fanfare, around the time Saramago was drafting and writing his book.²⁷

Today, it is no longer possible to get an answer from the author, and in any case, it is possible that Saramago would have answered that there is no connection, as he has done regarding other dialogues. The issue goes far beyond the Portuguese writer, as the idea that films can, in fact, influence books — and do so with the same intensity as the widely accepted movement of literary influence on cinema — remains unpopular. Furthermore, adaptations, like Scorsese's film, are commonly seen as less prestigious creations, doomed to fall short of the original: a certain hierarchization of the arts and types of creation still persists. It is in this sense that intermedial reflection can contribute to changing the landscape, revealing the benefits that can arise from this contamination between different media. The cinematization of narrative texts is, after all, a relatively recent phenomenon, particular to the 20th century: a new way of making literature, drawing on the resources of a new medium.

Special effects

Whether or not there is a more direct relationship between Saramago's novel and Scorsese's film, both the writer and the director share a fondness for special effects, using them frequently and often in a dramatic, exaggerated, or even parodic manner. In Saramago, the cinematization is sometimes accompanied by comments on what is happening, as in this road scene in which the narrator makes an incisive point:

25 As in José Carlos de Vasconcelos: José Saramago: "Deus é o mau da fita", in: JL 487 (1991), p. 8.

26 "Fez muitas leituras para escrever este livro?". Francisco José Viegas: Uma biografia de Jesus, segundo José Saramago, in: Revista Ler 16 (1991), p. 34.

27 A brief comparison between Scorsese's Jesus and Saramago's has already been made in an article for *El País*, but there is no mention of a possible dialogue between the two. José E. Rodríguez-Ibañez: Saramago, Scorsese y Jesucristo, in: *El País*, 16.3.1993.

[Mary and Joseph] had now been walking for more than an hour and Bethlehem could not be far away. To their surprise, after leaving Jerusalem they found the road deserted, for with Bethlehem so close to the city, one might have expected to find a continuous toing and froing of people and animals. [...] If one were to visualize the world as a person, it would be like watching someone cover his eyes with his mantle and listening to the travellers' footsteps, just as we listen to the song of birds nestling among the branches, and the same is true of us, for that is how we must appear to the birds hidden in the trees.²⁸

Image, movement, and sound — Saramago spares no effort in borrowing from various media. We see the travelers advancing slowly, Mary pregnant on the donkey, and soon we are led to imagine only the sound of their footsteps, surrounded by a strange emptiness. The selected and edited sound of one scene extends into another, a typical cinematic technique, but Saramago's exploration goes beyond cinematic language, importing special effects to do what only literature can do: a scene built entirely with words in which, suddenly, positions shift, birds are personified, and they too are allowed to hear our footsteps as readers.

As in a film that experiments with sound and visual effects, this scene makes us participate in the "bubble" of the travelers, later explained by the narrator through an image that will recur throughout *The Gospel*: "Joseph, Mary and the donkey had crossed the desert, for the desert is not as we imagine, the desert is any unpopulated territory, not forgetting that we can find a barren desert amidst a great throng of people".²⁹

The desert, whether literal or metaphorical, is a key setting in the novel, and as such, it deepens its cinematic dialogue. It is mentioned several times as a place of retreat and secrecy. It is in the desert that Ananias and Joseph, and later Mary and Jesus, have sensitive and decisive conversations, and the desert here does not necessarily correspond to "some vast expanse of sand or that sea of burning dunes we generally conjure up in our minds whenever we read or hear the word desert. As understood here, desert can also be found in the green land of Galilee".³⁰ The desert is the place of absence; the narrator even speaks of "the most absolute of all deserts, that of solitary death",³¹ and Jesus is repeatedly placed in this landscape.

In the Synoptics, the desert is the setting for Christ's temptation. The episode has been greatly exploited by cinema, which, thanks to its special

28 Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, p. 51.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

effects, offers a range of possibilities for creating different hallucinations, such as those in Scorsese's film: a serpent taunts Jesus with the voice of Mary Magdalene, a seductive sound like seashells and jewels tinkling in the background; then a lion appears and challenges him, disappearing at the edge of the circle drawn on the ground where Jesus stands; and finally, a column of fire erupts, with the Devil's metallic voice tempting the son of God.

The Gospel also has its version of the temptation in the desert, with its own special effects. But the tempter will be different. Jesus is naked, searching for his lost sheep "in the wild countryside south of Jericho which borders on the desert." Recalling that it would have been more natural for the sheep to have gone to graze on the fertile banks of the River Jordan, the narrator points out that "logic, however, is not everything in this life",³² and, as in the biblical parable mentioned (Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:4-6), the good shepherd has to deal with difficulties:

The desert opens up to receive Jesus, then closes behind him, as if cutting off any path of retreat. Silence echoes in his ears like the noise from one of those dead, empty shells which are washed ashore where they absorb the vast sound of the waves until found by some passerby who brings them slowly to his ear, listens and says, The wilderness. Jesus's feet are bleeding, the sun pushes back the clouds and stabs him in the back, thorns prick his legs like clawing nails, thistles scratch him. Sheep, where are you, he calls out, and the hills pass on his words, Where are you, where are you. This in itself would be the perfect echo, but the prolonged, faraway sound of the shell imposes itself, murmuring God, Gooooood, Gooooood. Then as if the hills had suddenly been swept away, Jesus emerged from the labyrinth of valleys into a flat and sandy arena with the sheep right in the centre. He ran towards it as fast as he could with his blistered feet, but a voice restrained him, Wait.³³

The sound is emphasized, an attempt is made to reproduce the effect of an echo, which returns transformed, edited; the setting alternates and scenes are overlap, rapidly, as if in a montage; the reunion between Jesus and his sheep, now grown up, is deliberately cinematized. And the staging will be attributed to God: "The voice answered, I am the Lord, and Jesus knew why he had felt obliged to strip off his clothes on the edge of the desert."³⁴

Several elements from the Old Testament intervene before and throughout this first encounter between Jesus and God, especially engaging with the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-5), but the New Testament is also a reference. As in the Synoptics, Jesus' experience in the desert will mark

32 Ibid., pp. 194-195.

33 Ibid., p. 197.

34 Ibid., p. 197.

the beginning of his ministry, and only after that does he begin to perform miracles. In the novel, God also promises him "power and glory" — the echo of Satan's words from Matthew 4:7-9 and Luke 4:6-7 is powerful here — and in exchange asks for sacrifices: initially, his previously spared lamb, and later, his own life. At that moment, Jesus fails the narrative test, and his judge becomes the shepherd, who, from that point onward, will no longer allow the boy to follow him.³⁵

Saramago and Bertolucci

Like in a film, the setting plays an important narrative role in *The Gospel*, and this ranges from nature to the Temple of Jerusalem: the characters not only move through these spaces but are also defined by them. Showing them in detail, "filming" them up close and from afar, highlighting their colors and lights, is a way to deepen both the characters and the spaces. At several levels, then, *The Gospel* explores the landscape associated with biblical times and so often recreated in films, with its valleys and with a desert like that of Judea which, in the narrator's words, "fired and scorched the ancient scars of a land promised to the chosen few but forever uncertain as to whom it should surrender."³⁶

It should be noted, however, that there is something cinematic about this biblical landscape, in the sense that it is partly a cultural construct — frequently recreated with the help of other deserts. Both Pasolini and Scorsese, for instance, visited the Holy Land but eventually gave up on filming there. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* was shot in Italy, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* in Morocco.³⁷ Desert landscapes carry a mystical symbolic weight, and this goes far beyond films set in the time of Christ. It is in the Sahara Desert that the characters in *The Sheltering Sky* go in search of answers to questions they can barely articulate — and it is there that they get lost, beneath a scorching sun and a stunning sky that offers no reply. In Bertolucci's adaptation, marked by wide shots and the warm tones so typical of his style, Port (John Malkovich) and Kit (Debra Winger) discuss that very landscape in a frustrated love scene in the desert: "Here, the sky is so strange. It's almost

35 Ibid., pp. 197-199.

36 Ibid., pp. 61-62.

37 Lindlof: *Hollywood under Siege*, pp. 49, 52.

solid, as if it were protecting us from what's behind. Look.' 'What's behind?'. 'It's nothing. Just night.'"³⁸

For Bertolucci and for Saramago alike, the setting is not merely accessory or decorative — it produces meaning. The nature that is filmed or described becomes intertwined with the characters' existential anguish or with the recreation of a mythical and mystical time and space. But at the same time, in both cases, nature is also shown simply as nature, as if to suggest: the desert, in the end, lives within people. So does the sky. In the Massacre of the Innocents episode, the narrator of *The Gospel* describes a clamor of screams — we do not see the scene, we only hear it alongside Mary and Joseph — and explains that "those were no weeping angels lamenting human misfortunes, these were the voices of men and women maddened by grief beneath an empty sky."³⁹ These narratives are about men and their choices, staging dramas, emotions, and doubts that seem as old as the world in which they are felt:

[Mary Magdalene and Jesus] slept wherever they happened to be, seeking no comfort other than each other's lap, sometimes with only the sky for a roof, God's enormous eye, black but speckled with lights, lingering reflections left by glances raised to heaven by one generation after another, interrogating the silence and listening to the only answer silence ever gives.⁴⁰

Narrative devices typical of literature, cinema, or of a language that is now a blend of both arts — and of several others — are extensively used by Saramago, making *The Gospel* a deeply filmic, imagistic, and modern work. The story of Jesus has been told so many times, in so many ways, and part of what makes *The Gospel* unique is Saramago's choice to present it as a story consciously aware of its fictional status, crafted through a series of devices that may serve either to deceive — one of the main criticisms leveled at Hollywood cinema⁴¹ — or to make clear that a fictional game is underway, and that there is an author behind it. This choice is heightened by the use of metalepsis, as defined by Genette,⁴² which influences the reader's perception of the references being reworked — and in the case of *The Gospel*, this may, in certain contexts, have been perceived as offensive. Metalepsis is not, however, exclusive to this novel; it is a hallmark of Saramago's style, a style shaped in

38 Bernardo Bertolucci (dir.): *The Sheltering Sky*, London 1990.

39 Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, p. 78.

40 Ibid., p. 312.

41 Nowell-Smith: *The History of Cinema*, pp. 22-24, 95.

42 Gérard Genette: *Figures III*, Paris 1972, pp. 243-244, and *Métalepse: de la figure à la fiction*, Paris 2004, p. 14-24.

dialogue with the broader exploration of fiction's boundaries that defined the 20th century.

Like Bertolucci, who places Paul Bowles, the author of the book he is adapting, on screen and has his characters talk about cinema and shoot a film within a film in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), Saramago also uses fiction, metaleptically, to reflect on fiction — not only in its literary form, but also in other mediums. The author of *The Gospel* explicitly assumes, finally, how much he owes to the perspective, to framing, to light, and to the palette of other arts, which are akin in the effort to try to capture and understand, for example, the passage of time, as well as their own desire to do so:

There are certain moments in life which should be arrested and protected from time, and not simply be transmitted in a gospel or painting or, as in this modern age, in a photograph, film or video. How much more interesting it would be if the person who lived those moments or brought them to life were to remain forever visible to their descendants, so that those of us alive today could go to Jerusalem and see with our own eyes young Jesus, the son of Joseph, all wrapped up in his small threadbare mantle [...]. Since his life is just beginning at the age of thirteen, one can assume there are brighter and sadder hours in store for him, moments of greater joy and despair, greater pleasure and grief, but this is the moment we ourselves would choose, while the city slumbers, the sun is at a standstill, the light intangible, a young boy looking wide-eyed at the houses, wrapped in a mantle, a knapsack at his feet, and the entire world, near or far, waiting in suspense. Alas, he has already moved, the instant has come and gone, time has carried us into the realms of memory, it was like this, no, it was not, and everything becomes what we choose to invent.⁴³

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43 Saramago: *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, pp. 148-149.

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