

Licence to Adapt: the Resilience of the 007 Narration in *Casino Royale*

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Abstract

In 1953 Ian Fleming published his first novel, *Casino Royale*, introducing 007 agent James Bond to his readers. The homonymous 2006 film, directed by Martin Campbell, is the third screen adaptation of the novel and is considered to be a prequel of the successful franchise, as it presents an inexperienced and vulnerable James Bond at the beginning of his career.

According to semiotic theories, film transposition is a form of translation. The term *transposition*, in fact, evokes the transition from written to audio-visual narrative, hence the idea of going through and beyond the original text, increasing its semantic potential.

The aim of the present paper is a comparative analysis of language uses in the novel and the film, both in a diamesic and a diachronic perspective, as the original 1953 story is recontextualized in the 2000s.

James Bond, the fictional British Secret Service agent created by Ian Fleming in 1953, has been adapted for television, radio, comic strip, video games, and has been the protagonist of the most successful and long-lasting film franchise in cinema history. Indeed, it is thanks to those films, not the novels, that everybody knows something of the 007 myth. Actually, as genre films, the Bond movies have been consistently successful since the early 1960s, winning the approval of several generations of audiences all over the world.

Casino Royale, published in 1953, is the first novel written by Ian Fleming and featuring the Double-0 agent. In 1954 it was adapted into a one-hour television adventure as part of the CBS dramatic anthology series *Climax Mystery Theater*¹, whereas in 1967 it was adapted into a comedy spy film featuring David Niven as the *original* James Bond². The 2006 film *Casino Royale*, starring for the first time Daniel Craig as James Bond, reboots the 007 franchise³, establishing a new timeline and narrative structure meant to precede rather than succeed the earlier Bond films. *Casino Royale* is not a prequel in the traditional sense, as it is set in the 2000s and not in the time period before *Dr. No*, the first Bond movie released in 1962 and based on the homonymous 1958 novel. The

film is a prequel in respect of Bond's life, as it depicts his first mission as a 00 agent, hence his career before the events of *Dr. No*.

In a number of interviews and press releases, Martin Campbell, the film director, stated that, working to such a *prequel*, he was interested in «going back to the basis of the book»⁴. But how can a narration born in 1953 still function in the 21st century? Even more so, a narration linked to «a rather absurd figure, an ideological construct of Austerity Britain and the Cold War»?⁵ What seems unmatched in the success of 007 compared to other long-standing film instalments like those of Tarzan, Dracula or Sherlock Holmes is the currency of James Bond: whatever the geopolitical context, he always fits in.

The 007 franchise has successfully negotiated changes in film culture finding the right balance between repetition and variation, continuity and change. On the one hand, the narrative formula has remained constant; the audiences have come to expect the familiar situations such as Bond's briefing by M, the seduction of the girl, the first and last meeting with the villain. On the other hand, the plasticity of the 007 persona has permitted his migration into different contexts, reflecting changes in the international geopolitical situation, from the Cold War to the new, globalized world⁶. The outstanding consistency of its narrative formula sets the 007 narration apart, in that it seems to work on its own, independently of a specific authorial voice: the James Bond narration can no longer be explained according to the original novelist, nor in function of the current producers, «since actors and directors are interchangeable, as are the social and historical backgrounds at play within the plot»⁷. The tasks to be performed by anyone involved in the production of a 007 movie appear to consist essentially in incorporating a variety of non-determining narrative paradigms, which do not alter the essential structure of the Bond story.

Critical discussions of adaptation generally deal with the idea of the original versus the copy and are often permeated by the problem of fidelity. Answering a question by Truffaut on the relationship between a novel and a film, Hitchcock offered this well-known joke⁸:

You probably know the story of the two goats who are eating up cans containing the reels of a film taken from a best seller. And one goat says to the other, «Personally, I prefer the book!»

The quote above seems to sum up the typical essay on adaptation, but it also reminds us that the novel and the film differ firstly in the material the two media are made of, which implies the understanding of the different semiotic and aesthetic mechanisms governing written narrative as compared to narrative by images and sounds.

Umberto Eco⁹ suggests that we use the term *transmutation* rather than adaptation, focusing on the fact that the *inter-semiotic translation* occurring between the novel and the film originates a completely new work of art. A film

has to be judged independently from the original text it comes from, whose existence, as in the case of *Casino Royale*, is often even ignored by most of the audience¹⁰. And audience experience – the pleasure of reception – is paramount in considering the value of an adaptation¹¹.

It is in this theoretical framework that most of the approaches to adaptation studies have developed¹², mobilizing a wide vocabulary of active terms, as Sanders puts forward¹³:

Version, variation, interpretation, continuation, transformation, imitation, pastiche, parody, forgery, travesty, transposition, revaluation, revision, rewriting, echo.

This list of terms suggests that adaptation may be intended to achieve different, even opposing, aims that have been effectively classified by Wagner as follows¹⁴:

- Transposition.
- Commentary.
- Analogy.

The three categories above not infrequently overlap. Furthermore, it could be argued that all screen versions of novels are transpositions, as they move a text from a genre to another and deliver it to a different audience. However, many adaptations, like Campbell's, do not relocate their source text just generically, but also in temporal, geographical and cultural terms (Sanders).

As to Wagner's second category, the source text is purposely altered in some respects and the adaptation, whose complete impact rests on the audience's awareness of an explicit relationship to the original text, comments on its politics usually by means of alteration and/or addition (McFarlane).

Finally, analogy represents a further deviation from the novel to the point where the film can be seen as a stand-alone work of art through such processes like recontextualization and relocation (Sanders), which is what Campbell did with *Casino Royale*. On the one hand, the 1953 novel is clearly informed by the zeitgeist of the Cold War era, in particular the Manichaeic view of a world divided into two blocs. Not surprisingly, Fleming's villain, Le Chiffre, works for a fictional Soviet assassination bureau named SMERSH. On the other hand, the film, set in the 2000s, retains the name and some characteristics of the villain, but in the wake of 9/11 transforms him into a freelance terrorist financier. In addition, the first 55 minutes of the film are totally new compared to the novel, though the motivation behind them are true to the spirit of the book: Le Chiffre invests a lot of money which does not belong to him, loses it, then sets up a high-stakes card game¹⁵ to try to win it back. The novel presents this as background information in a dossier and begins with Bond's arrival at Casino Royale, which in the film happens only in the middle of the first half. From this point onwards, however, the film follows the book very closely, but with a substantial difference concerning the location of the casino: Campbell shifts the novel's setting from France to Montenegro. The choice contributes

to the film's complex interweaving of references and temporalities: Montenegro, with its fabulous casinos, has recently become one of the most renowned world capitals of gambling.

Since the aim of the present paper is a comparative analysis of language uses in the two works in a diamesic and diachronic perspective, I have concentrated on the dialogues between James Bond and the other characters present both in the novel and in the 2006 film. For the latter, I have utilised personal transcriptions of the film video¹⁶.

Due to reasons of space, I will report here a small selection of crucial scenes. Let's start with M giving Bond the briefing about the mission he will be sent to. In the novel the meeting takes place in M's office, at the MI6 headquarters in London. The tenor of the conversation is quite formal and polite¹⁷, with M's fatherly attitude towards his best agent and Bond addressing him as "sir" and using gambling jargon:

James Bond's interview with M had been short.

«What about it, Bond?» asked M when Bond came back into his room after reading Head of S's memorandum [...].

Bond looked across the desk into the shrewd, clear eyes.

«It's very kind of you, sir, I'd like to do it. But I can't promise to win. The odds at baccarat are the best after *trente-et-quarante* – evens except for the tiny *cagnotte* – but I might get a bad run against me and get cleaned out. [...].»

Bond was stopped by the cold eyes, M knew all this already, knew the odds at baccarat as well as Bond. That was his job – knowing the odds of everything, and knowing men, his own and the opposition's. Bond wished he had kept quiet about his misgiving.

«He can have a bad run too,» said M. «You'll have plenty of capital. Up to twenty-five million, the same as him. We'll start you on ten and send you another ten when you've had a look round. You can make the extra five yourself.»¹⁸

In the film the location of the briefing is very informal: a beach at the Bahamas (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Bond and M



Significantly, since the 1995 film *GoldenEye* (also directed by Martin Campbell), M has been a woman, played by Judi Dench. Her relationship with Bond is quite controversial: in *GoldenEye* she defines Bond as «a sexist, misogynist dinosaur. A relic of the Cold War», the same Cold War she confesses to miss in *Casino Royale* because of Bond's non-conventional behaviour. The tenor of their conversation is colloquial. M's reference to 9/11 and the stock market serves the extra-diegetic purpose to recontextualize the story, whereas Bond's use of the slang expression “gonna” rather than the standard one “going to” gives his language a sense of contemporaneity and universality, which detaches him from the «parochial Britishness»⁹ that characterises the protagonist of the novel. As visual-verbal cohesion plays a central role in the communication between the film and the extra-medial audience, the information required for interpreting the verbal meaning of the first line of the following transcript are to be recovered from the co-occurring visual information: M has just made implanted in Bond's arm a small tracking device in order to follow her agent's movement more closely.

Bond: So you can keep an eye on me?

M: Yes. When they analysed the stock market after 9/11, the CIA discovered a massive shorting of airline stocks. When the stocks hit bottom on 9/12, somebody made a fortune. The same thing happened this morning with Skyfleet stock, or was supposed to. With their prototype destroyed, the company would be near bankruptcy. Instead, somebody lost over \$100 million betting the wrong way.

Bond: You think it's this man Le Chiffre.

M: Which would explain how he could set up a high-stakes poker game at Casino Royale in Montenegro. Ten players, \$ 10 million buy-in, 5 million re-buy. Winner takes all. Potentially 150 million.

Bond: Good. Then we'll know where he'll be. Do you want a clean kill or to send a message?

M: We want him alive. Le Chiffre doesn't have 100 million to lose.

Bond: Has he been playing the stock market with his clients' funds? They're not gonna be too happy when they find out it's gone.

M: We can't let him win this game. If he loses, he'll have nowhere to run. We'll give him sanctuary in return for everything he knows. I'm putting you in the game replacing someone who's playing for a syndicate. I wish it wasn't the case. I would ask you if you could remain emotionally detached, but I don't think that's your problem, is it, Bond?

Bond: No.

M: Don't worry about getting in touch. We'll know where you are.

Bond: You can stop pretending. You knew I wouldn't let this drop, didn't you?

M: Well. I knew you were you.

In the film *Casino Royale* the well-known catchphrase “shaken, not stirred”, which refers to 007's preference for how he wants his vodka martini prepared, is replaced by a detailed order of a drink of his own creation he will name *The*

Vesper, after the beautiful accountant-agent Bond will fall in love with. The recipe is lifted almost verbatim from the novel:

Bond [...] looked carefully at the barman.

«A dry martini,” he said. “One. In a deep champagne goblet.»

«*Oui, monsieur.*»

«Just a moment. Three measures of Gordon’s, one of vodka, half a measure of Kina Lillet. Shake it very well until it’s ice-cold, then add a large thin slice of lemon-peel. Got it?»

«Certainly, monsieur.» The barman seemed pleased with the idea²⁰.

Here is the dialogue in the film, which creates somewhat of an anachronism as Kina Lillet would no longer be available in 2006, because it has not been made since 1985, but re-branded as Lillet Blanc²¹:

Bond: “A dry martini.”

Barman: “*Oui, monsieur.*”

Bond: “Wait. Three measures of Gordon’s, one of vodka, half of Kina Lillet, shake it over ice, then add a thin slice of lemon-peel.”

Barman: “Yes, sir.”

Both in the novel and in the film Bond’s drink formula raises the admiration of Felix Leiter, the CIA operative who on screen is featured as an African-American addressing 007 with the friendly term “brother”, which is completely extraneous to the novel.

Later though, after Bond loses money to Le Chiffre, the tenor of the drink order will be completely different, offering the audience a rare image of an *imperfect* 007, a man who can fail:

Bond: Vodka-martini.

Barman: Shaken or stirred?

Bond: Do I look like I give a damn?

But the passage that actually reveals Bond in all his human vulnerability is the torture scene. In the novel, 007 is sitting on a chair whose cane sit has been cut out, so that “His buttocks and the underpart of his body protruded through the seat of the chair towards the floor”²², with Le Chiffre “tenderising” the secret agent’s private parts with a cane carpet-beater. The villain talks to Bond in a patronizing tone, addressing him as “My dear boy”, which is also the title of the novel chapter. Bond looks completely passive and resigned, as he remains silent and concentrated on the pain to come. The references to the tortures his colleagues suffered from the Germans and the Japanese contextualize the story in the second after-war:

«My dear boy,» Le Chiffre spoke like a father, “the game of Red Indians is over, quite over. You have stumbled by mischance into a game for grown-ups and you have already found it a painful experience. You are not equipped, my dear boy, to play games with adults and it was very foolish of your nanny in London to have sent you out here with your spade and bucket. [...] Where is the money?”

[...]

Bond closed his eyes and waited for the pain. He knew that the beginning of the torture is the worst. There is a parabola of agony. A crescendo leading up to a peak and then the nerves are blunted and react progressively less until unconsciousness and death. All he could do was to pray for the peak [...].

He had been told by colleagues who had survived torture by the Germans and the Japanese that towards the end there came a wonderful period of warmth and languor leading into a sort of sexual twilight where pain turned to pleasure [...].

He opened his eyes a fraction.

Le Chiffre had been waiting for this and like a rattle-snake the cane instrument leapt from the floor. It struck again and again so that Bond screamed and his body jangled in the chair like a marionette²³.

In the movie, the torture scene is lifted from the novel (see Figure 2), though the torture device has changed: Le Chiffre hits Bond with a knotted rope. A carpet-beater would have been conceivably unusual – if not funny – in the 2000s. But the most striking difference from the novel – apart from the torturer’s request of “the password” rather than “the money” – is in the tenor of the conversation between the two protagonists. It is probably in this scene that Daniel Craig most noticeably plays up Bond’s firm self-possession. Telegraph film critic Sukhdev Sandhu described «the testicle scene» as the one in which Bond is «happiest, perversely enough, and most authentically himself»²⁴. Bond is not resigned to undergo the torture and engages Le Chiffre in a dramatic but at the same time witty dialogue, becoming ironical on the awful injuries he is suffering and using humour to *disarm* his opponent as well as, paradoxically, to lower his defences:

FIGURE 2
The torture scene



Le Chiffre: You've taken good care of your body. Such a waste. [*He hits Bond*] You know, I never understood all these elaborate tortures. It's the simplest thing to cause more pain than a man can possibly endure. [*He hits Bond*] And of course it's not only the immediate agony, but the knowledge that if you do not yield soon enough there will be little left to identify you as a man. The only question remains: will you yield in time? I want the money. [*He hits Bond*] Miss Lynd will give me the account number, if she hasn't already. So all I need from you is the password. The password, please.

Bond: I've got a little inch down there. Would you mind? [*He hits Bond*] No! No! No! No. To the right. To the right. To the right!

Le Chiffre: You are a funny man, Mr Bond. [*He hits Bond*]

Bond: Yeah! Yes, yes, yes. [*laughing*] Now the whole world's gonna know that you died scratching my balls.

Le Chiffre: I died?

Bond: Yes. Because no matter what you do, I'm not gonna give you the password. Which means your clients will hurt you down and cut you into pieces of meat while you're still breathing. Because if you kill me there'll be nowhere else to hide.

Le Chiffre: But you are so wrong! Because even after I slaughtered you and your little girlfriend, your people would still welcome me with open arms because they need what I know.

Bond: The big picture.

Obviously, Bond survives the agony thanks to somebody who bursts into the torture room as a sort of *deus ex machina* and kills Le Chiffre. Later, both in the novel and in the film, the legendary womaniser falls in love with Vesper, their passion spiced up with witty dialogues. The following one is from the novel:

Vesper looked at him [Bond] thoughtfully.

"People are islands", she said. "They don't really touch. However close they are, they're really quite separate. [...]"

Bond thought with dismay that she must be going into a *vin triste*²⁵. [...] But suddenly she gave a happy laugh. [...]

Bond laughed, relieved. "Let's join up and make a peninsula", he said²⁶.

A more literal innuendo is uttered by Bond in the film, during his convalescence on the Como Lake:

Vesper: You know, James. If the only thing left of you was your smile and your little finger, you'd still be more of a man than anyone I've ever known.

Bond: That's because you know what I can do with my little finger.

Later 007 will realize Vesper's betrayal. In the novel Bond will find her dead, while in the film he will try in vain to save her life in a frantic sequence shot in Venice. Anyway, 007's last words for her will be the same: "The bitch is dead now", which is also the last line in the novel.

The film, instead, closes with the well-known catchphrase: “The name is Bond. James Bond”, which sounds as the usual proclamation “James Bond will return” made before the credits roll.

The short analysis carried out in the present contribution confirms the extent to which by changing the medium, from novel to film, the same story is necessarily retold from a different viewpoint. In watching the film, the audience is entering into a selective interpretation, the screenwriter’s imaginary, that is separate from his/her own²⁷. It is the film’s screenwriter who selects the scenes in the novel to be portrayed on film, and this challenges, for some critics, the latter’s fidelity to the original work.

A further aspect to take into consideration here is the fact that Fleming’s *Casino Royale* is not a classic, hence the non-attendance of a well-read audience, familiar with the original novel and able to recognize, acknowledge and possibly enjoy the adaptation, makes the comparison with the film more difficult if not totally absent, as the adaptation of this material turns out to be less bothered with questions of fidelity. Indeed, the film features important changes from the novel that serve the purpose to recontextualize a 1953 story in the 2000s, but also to transform a spy story – a largely literary genre – into an action movie, a purely cinematic genre wherein physical action takes precedence in the storytelling, hence a highly visual genre, “depending on lots of fast-paced action and sheer spectacle”²⁸, where the story is *presented* rather than told, leaving little to viewers’ imagination.

These changes, as we have seen above, affect first and foremost the language used by the different characters: stories, including the language in which they are told or presented, change, and change with the people who want to experience them.

Notes

1. Cfr. A. Lycett, *Ian Fleming*, Phoenix, London 1996.
2. Cfr. C. Lindner (ed.), *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2009.
3. J. Otto, *Interview: Campbell on Casino Royale*, in “IGN”, October 19, 2005 <http://www.ign.com/articles/2005/10/19/interview-campbell-on-casino-royale> (retrieved: April 5, 2013).
4. J. Roman, *Director Martin Campbell Talks Casino Royale*, in “MovieWeb”, November 17, 2006, <http://www.movieweb.com/news/director-martin-campbell-talks-casino-royale> (retrieved: April 7, 2013).
5. J. Chapman, *Foreward*, in D. Ferreras Savoye, *The Signs of James Bond: Semiotic Explorations in the World of 007*, McFarland, Jefferson (NC) 2013, p. 1.
6. Cfr. P. Attolino, *Shaken... and Stirred: Different Degrees of Bondness through Discourse Analysis*, in M. Dossena, D. Torretta, A. M. Sportelli (eds.), *Forms of Migrations – Migrations of Forms*, Progedit, Bari 2009.
7. Ferreras Savoye, *The Signs of James Bond: Semiotic Explorations in the World of 007*, cit., p. 5.
8. A. Hitchcock, F. Truffaut, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, Routledge, London-New York 1984, p. 129.
9. Cfr. U. Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa. Esperienze di traduzione*, Bompiani, Milano 2003.

10. Cfr. A. Costa, *Letteratura e cinema: linee di una ricerca in progress*, Working Papers Università IUAV di Venezia, Venezia 2008.
11. Cfr. B. McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1996.
12. Cfr. I. Whelehan, *Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas*, in D. Cartmell, I. Whelehan (eds.), *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Routledge, London-New York 1999.
13. J. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Routledge, London-New York 2006, p. 18.
14. Cfr. G. Wagner, *The Novel and the Cinema*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Rutherford, NJ 1975.
15. The card game featured in the novel was Baccarat, replaced in the film with Texas Hold 'Em as the popular game played in 2000s casinos.
16. The transcriptions were made from *Casino Royale*, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007.
17. Cfr. M. A. K. Halliday, R. Hasan, *Language, context, and text: aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985.
18. I. Fleming, *Casino Royale*, Penguin Books, London [1953] 2006, pp. 22-3.
19. J. Chapman, *Bond and Britishness*, in E. P. Comentale, S. Vatt, S. Willman (eds.), *Ian Fleming and James Bond: the Cultural Politics of 007*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2005, p. 129.
20. Fleming, *Casino Royale*, cit., pp. 52-3.
21. Cfr. <http://summerfruitcup.wordpress.com/tag/kina-lillet-substitute/> (retrieved: April 28, 2013).
22. Fleming, *Casino Royale*, cit., p. 132.
23. Ivi, pp. 133-6.
24. C. Higson, *It's got everything you want from a Bond film*, in "The Telegraph", November 17, 2006, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/3656576/Its-got-everything-you-want-from-a-Bond-film.html> (retrieved: May 23, 2013).
25. The French idiomatic expression *vin triste* describes that melancholy state that some feel as a result of drinking too much.
26. Fleming, *Casino Royale*, cit., pp. 190-1.
27. Cfr. R. Stam, *Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation*, in R. Stam, A. Raengo (eds.), *Literature and Film. A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, Blackwell, Oxford 2005.
28. Lindner, *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader*, cit., p. 92.