

## **Intersemiotic translations of violence: Comic-book and screen adaptations of Massimo Carlotto's *Arrivederci amore, ciao***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores representations of violence in Massimo Carlotto's novel *Arrivederci amore, ciao* and in two subsequent adaptations or "intersemiotic translations" (Jakobson 2004) – the two-volume comic book and the film. The novel's pulp qualities and vivid descriptions owe a lot to both cinema and comics, yet reworking it for these media also necessitates significant changes to the storyline, the depiction of violence, and the kind of criminality presented. The different capacities and conventions of each medium – book, film, comic – allow different aspects of this "*storia di una canaglia*", or scoundrel's tale, as the comic book's subtitle has it, to be emphasised. In the case of the comic, I look at the way the distribution of panels across the page and the use of colour and onomatopoeia contribute to a visual, aural and textual depiction of violence. In the film, the tropes and techniques of genre cinema create a strong sense of suspense and dread. In both cases, however, a change in the focus of the plot results in a shift from a story of violence at a systemic, societal level to one focused more on the personal. I draw on research in translation studies and adaptation studies (e.g. Lefevere & Bassnett 1990; Hutcheon 2006) to investigate this shift.

### **Intersemiotic translation and multimodality**

In 1959 Roman Jakobson coined the term "intersemiotic translation" to describe the kind of transfer or transformation that takes place when a text is rewritten (or in some other way reformulated) for a different medium (Jakobson 2004). The multimodality at play as one system of signs is replaced by another system of signs saying *more or less* the same thing – or "*quasi la stessa cosa*", to borrow Umberto Eco's (2003) description of translation – can productively be thought of as a kind of translation. Intersemiotic translation is not "translation proper", as Jakobson stresses, but the metaphor of translation, along with aspects of translation theory and practice, can provide insights into the adaptation of Massimo Carlotto's novel

*Arrivederci amore, ciao* (2000) for two more visual media: comic book (Carlotto et al. 2004; Carlotto et al. 2005) and film (Soavi 2005).

With interlingual translation, i.e. from one language to another, loss and gain due to linguistic and cultural differences are inevitable. In intersemiotic translation, too, the repertoire made available by the medium selected shapes the decisions and strategies of the adapter. For example, stories may be shortened or simplified, sub-plots emphasised or removed, characters changed or omitted in accordance with the demands of time, funding, audience and so forth. In both cases, the new text's function (or *skopos*, as it is often known in translation studies) and its audience are paramount in devising strategies for textual transfer: the finished product needs to address a different constituency.

The study of translations across media consequently provides useful new insights into the way a text's message, and its audience and reception, can change with adaptation. In the case of the three texts discussed here, a particularly interesting aspect is the depiction of violence and – for the film in particular – the connection with an important period in Italy's history, the *anni di piombo* (leaden years), a time of left- and right-wing terrorism generally dated from the late 1960s to the early 1980s (Antonello & O'Leary 2009: 1; see also O'Leary 2011: 7-10). Although fictional, the three texts explore and investigate (to differing extents) one particular aspect of the terrorist phenomenon and its aftermath: the "rehabilitation" of some ex-terrorists and their continued presence on the Italian scene, sometimes in shady collusion with the country's ruling class. Investigating the intersemiotic translation of the violence in *Arrivederci amore, ciao* reveals that the adaptations privilege interpersonal and "visual" violence over the critique of the use and abuse of power in society as a whole.

### **Carlotto's noir as social and historical commentary**

Carlotto's *Arrivederci amore, ciao* (2000), published in English as *The Goodbye Kiss* (2006), is a bleak and violent noir. It opens with Giorgio Pellegrini living as a guerrilla in Central America, where he and his friend Luca fled after the bomb they planted as young left-wing militants in their hometown of Padua accidentally killed a nightwatchman. Pellegrini's first act in the novel is to shoot this former comrade dead on the orders of the revolutionary guerrilla group's *comandante*, and then to leave the jungle. After periods in hiding, exploiting the hospitality and generosity of vulnerable older women, Pellegrini returns to Italy to serve prison time for his militant activities. His sentence is short because he has blackmailed former comrades, who remain true believers in the cause, into finding someone else to admit to planting the bomb. On release, he works in a seedy nightclub, before orchestrating an armed robbery that makes him and a corrupt police officer extremely wealthy. The two men are ruthless, killing their ragtag group of accomplices before dividing the spoils. With his new-found wealth and the help of a lawyer specialising in such manoeuvres, Pellegrini makes his entry into high society. Working from the bottom up, he establishes an outwardly respectable identity as the owner of a top restaurant in Italy's northeast, all the while engaging in usury, intimidation and extortion to consolidate his power and status. His clients at the restaurant are all pillars of society who themselves are involved in underhand activities. The novel culminates with Pellegrini murdering his sweet, gentle young fiancée Roberta, who has begun to suspect him of murder and thus has become a liability. Shortly afterwards, Pellegrini is granted his long-awaited *riabilitazione*: this process, outlined in articles 178 and 179 of the Italian penal code, means that, thanks to five years of apparent good behaviour since serving his prison term for terrorism, he is now considered untarnished.

The novel is a typical Carlotto noir – thrilling and suspenseful, with a reprehensible protagonist. As is often the case with noir, there is no investigation, not least because the storyline focuses on a criminal and his capacity to evade punishment. However, Italian noir is

quite different from what was originally meant by the term (De Cataldo 2008). If the classic American noir thriller is marked by the criminal or amoral protagonist's "inevitable fall" (Scaggs 2005: 108), Carlotto's novels in the genre do not end with the punishment or death of the law-breaking protagonist, but rather with his inexorable social advancement. In the context of the author's project to use the genre to shed light on the pervasive criminality within Italian society – the so-called "*zona grigia*", or grey area (Carlotto 2012: 28-29) – his noir novels are also an indictment of the kind of respectable society, or "*Italia bene*", that allows a man like Pellegrini not only to survive unscathed, but to thrive by doing the dirty work others dare not do themselves (Pedrollo 2017). *Arrivederci amore, ciao* and other Italian noir of the early 2000s explore the social and political changes occasioned by the previous decade's party-political corruption scandals (Pieri 2007: 194) and the earlier decades of extra-parliamentary political violence and unrest. The local setting – in this case, Italy's flourishing northeast – becomes a kind of shorthand for "a more composite, globalized, urban culture" (Rinaldi 2009: 122; see also Pezzotti 2014: 54) in which crime is widespread and multidimensional.

### **Violence, genre fluidity and the many shades of pulp**

The violence in *Arrivederci amore, ciao* emphasises the cruel and calculating character of the protagonist, and shows how wealth and respectability can be built on a foundation of brutality and exploitation. This is why, in comparing the three versions of this text and examining the different "languages" the text creators have at their disposal, I look particularly at the depiction of violence. Violence is, of course, central to a lot of crime fiction. In Carlotto's noir, it is a kind of "pulp" violence: almost trashy, almost – but not quite – gratuitous. For, while Pellegrini might seem over-the-top, he is nevertheless emblematic of a particular kind of social climber and Carlotto's declared intention is to use the element of shock to emphasise the significance of what is happening in twenty-first-century Italy, namely the establishment of a whole new kind of criminality (Carlotto 2012: 87).

The adaptation of *Arrivederci amore, ciao* into both film and comic book forms is an opportunity to foreground certain qualities and characteristics of those two media that were already latent in the original novel. Fabio Gadducci and Mirko Tivosanis (2015) have noted the affinities between noir fiction and both comics and cinema, and the pulp qualities and vivid descriptions of this particular novel owe a lot to those two media. Through his meticulous planning, Pellegrini choreographs every element of his existence, aestheticising his violent acts with an almost cinematic sensibility. He sets up his fiancée's murder as a kind of *mise-en-scene*, complete with CD soundtrack, shaping readers' reception of his violent performance, almost curating it, one might say. The colours of the novel, if one were to imagine them, would most likely be those dark, saturated colours of certain comic books, or indeed of noir cinema, as is only fitting of a genre that focuses on the shadow zones of society, "*le zone d'ombra*" (Domaradzka 2011: 2). In a sense, then, the adaptations translate the text "back" into the very media that shaped the noir genre in so many ways.

One of the most prominent criticisms of comics in the mid-twentieth century was their supposed propensity for violence; in the 1950s they were decried by guardians of public morality as a pernicious influence on young people (see e.g. Wertham 1954). Similar concerns are voiced from time to time about other popular visual media, such as cinema and computer games, but of course any artistic medium can be used to depict and describe violence; the question of whether text receivers then go on to engage in violence themselves is rather one of reception, and "the reader's contribution in dialogue with the text" (Caviglia & Cecchini 2009: 140). As comics artist and scholar Scott McCloud has incisively observed,

Every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice [...] the reader. I may have drawn an axe being raised [...] but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, dear reader, was your special crime (McCloud 1994: 68).

The "role of the reader" (Eco 1981) is of course a crucial part of all kinds of texts, but this complicity in violence is particularly interesting in the present case, because violence is such a privileged element in the adaptations of *Arrivederci amore, ciao*. My focus here is the different ways violence is deployed and depicted across the three different media. A key feature of the analysis is the impact of the multimodal quality of the two adaptations, and particularly the use of the visual mode, but also the aural. The novel's violence is neither gratuitous nor meaningless, thanks to the comment it makes on Italian society, in which Pellegrini ultimately secures a prestigious position, not despite but *because of* his criminal behaviour. Thus, the novel works as a kind of counter-information: the dramatic, page-turning narrative brings with it an exposé and indictment of the hypocrisy of the wealthy and the upwardly mobile. It fits within an important stream of Italian cultural production whose creators seek to furnish the general population with information and awareness of corruption, and hold that "history [...] should also be written and interpreted outside the courtrooms or historical archives" (Antonello & O'Leary 2009: 10). The film and comic book, as is discussed below, deploy violence rather differently.

### **Emphases and omissions, beginnings and endings**

In the novel, considerable space is dedicated to relating in detail Pellegrini's painstaking rise in society during the years between the armed robbery and his *riabilitazione*, a period when he establishes not just his restaurant but also numerous mutually beneficial relationships with influential citizens. This aspect of his upward trajectory is given quite a different spin in the adaptations, in which more of the plot revolves around spectacular episodes of physical violence. Michele Soavi's (2005) film adaptation, which, in terms of genre, has some overlaps with the *poliziottesco* or cop film of earlier years, though without the presence of any "strong, lone avenger to [...] restore order" (Wood 2013: 40), focuses mostly on the armed robbery and omits much of Pellegrini's subsequent social ascent, perhaps a less obviously cinematic and thrilling element of the plot. Watching the film, one could almost think Pellegrini struck it lucky to end up with a fancy restaurant and a clean bill of legal health, rather than arriving there through years of ruthless planning and manipulation. This kind of "narrative simplification" is a common feature of film adaptations (Cattrysse 1992: 57).

The time and space constraints of film and comics, respectively, also mean that a number of minor characters are missing from the adaptations; these include some of the women Pellegrini exploits at different stages of his ascent. While it is something of a relief that less violence against women is depicted, this omission does change the colour of the story, cutting out much of the protagonist's cold strategising as he manipulates these vulnerable but, to him, "useful" women in order to achieve his ends. Pellegrini's ultimate success, his ability to advance in society, is not just due to good luck but good management. This is a man playing the long game; his premeditation and calculation are the reason why he comes out "*vincente*", a winner (Carlotto 2000: 29). The film also introduces the main female character, Roberta, differently, with the couple's first date orchestrated by her friends rather than being a calculated decision by Pellegrini himself. In the novel, he decides that a church wedding will cement his image as an upstanding member of society and chooses Roberta for her submissiveness and insecurity (140).

However, the most striking change made in the film is in the use of the 1968 song “*Insieme a te non ci sto più*”, with its chorus of “*Arrivederci amore, ciao*”, from which all three texts take their title. In the novel, this is a song Roberta happens upon among Pellegrini's CDs, which he has never even listened to, and decides should be “their song”; he goes along with this in the interests of bolstering the kind of soap-opera love affair she longs for. At the end of the book, having poisoned her with aspirin, to which she is allergic, Pellegrini plays the song while calmly watching her agonising death (169-170). The brutality of this scrupulously planned murder is heightened greatly by the element of personalised torture he injects into the act, and the intertextual appropriation of the wistful end-of-love song adds a very dark element of dramatic irony to the whole scene. The over-layering of cinematic pulp violence with a powerful, if slightly melodramatic pop song provokes an ironic reading of both: no longer is the woman (singer Caterina Caselli) breaking off the relationship and moving on to better things, perhaps newly empowered. Instead the song is appropriated by Pellegrini as yet another expression of male violence against women.

It is here that the movie adaptation comes into its own, as the song can actually be heard, rather than just evoked in readers' heads through transcribed lyrics as is the case with the novel and comic. The murder is visually very striking on film, drawing on tropes and techniques of genre cinema. In a sham attempt at reconciliation, Pellegrini prepares Roberta a meal and an overhead shot with an ominous, disorienting quality is the attentive viewer's first clue as to what might be happening. Later, in Roberta's final moments, when she realises her fiancé has poisoned her, Pellegrini turns the song up to maximum volume. As she drags herself towards the door he blocks her way; from her perspective, he is monstrously tall and menacing. As we hear the line “*Si muore un po' per poter vivere*” (one dies a little to be able to live), the camera pans up from her dying gasps, to him looking down on her triumphantly.

The violence of the young woman's murder is emphasised by the choice of camera angles and close-ups, while the soundtrack further builds tension and underscores the perversity of Pellegrini's act (see also O'Leary 2011: 230). It is worth noting, however, that, in the film adaptation, this song has been a key part of the protagonist's life since long before he met Roberta; in fact, it is eventually revealed that it was playing when the young Pellegrini and his friend planted the bomb in Padua. The film includes numerous flashbacks to the bombing, which imply that throughout the intervening years Pellegrini has continued to feel remorse for that first crime, or at least that it has preyed upon his mind. One of the film's flashbacks even shows him trying to save the nightwatchman who became their unintended victim. This resignification of the song – and of Pellegrini's feelings about his first act of violence – changes his character considerably. In the novel, Pellegrini, who has long since lost any political convictions he might once have had, rarely thinks back on this initial act of violence.

For Alan O'Leary, the horror-movie sensibility of the final murder scene turns Pellegrini into a decaying creature of Italy's past, something almost supernatural, “a zombie survivor of past conflicts” (2011: 231), that threatens to rise up again at any moment, “the stinking carrion of the *anni di piombo*, still reeking (it seems) in the contemporary Italian air” (230). This effect is almost certainly enhanced by the resignification of the song, which serves to make an explicit link between Pellegrini's early political violence and his more sadistic and calculated murder of Roberta. The film depicts Pellegrini's menace with genre-appropriate relish, but greatly reduced, with respect to Carlotto's novel, is the depiction of the many minor characters who help the protagonist in his rise, even availing themselves of his skills and ruthlessness where it suits them. This aspect of the story shows how figures with wealth, status and an immaculate record can also be implicated in violent criminal activities: it is not merely through deceit that Pellegrini achieves *riabilitazione* but also by making himself indispensable to people whose power is predicated on violence, though they do not directly commit it

themselves. Eliding the collusion of high society in Pellegrini's cynical *riabilitazione* diminishes the comment the film makes on the pervasiveness of criminality among the country's higher echelons in the current period in Italy. *Arrivederci amore, ciao* becomes more of a personal story rather than a comment on society as a whole, a reading that is definitely available in the novel. The narrative shift that occurs in the translation to film is significant because, as Ruth Glynn et al. put it, "Film reacts to, and in its turn impacts on, the social and political world" and the way the difficult periods such as the *anni di piombo*, but also more recent decades in Italy, are remembered and "worked through" by the Italian public (2013: 21).

Comics, like films, play with distance and perspective to guide the reader through a narrative. In addition, the juxtaposition of panels on the page, as well as the positioning of page turns, directs the reading and helps regulate the flow of information, though this can always be disrupted by a reader skipping ahead or around (Eisner 2008: 52). As noted above, choices about what to depict and what to leave to the reader's imagination are an important feature of the medium's unique language. As in the film of *Arrivederci amore, ciao*, the primary focus in the comic book is the armed robbery, which occupies almost half its length. High-impact violence features throughout, accompanied by onomatopoeia – BLAM, KRAK, TUM (Carlotto et al. 2005: 44-45) – augmenting the visual with (evoked) auditory effects. What is largely absent from the comic, however, is Pellegrini's engagement in a more insidious, less "splatter-full" kind of violence – that of intimidation, blackmail and extortion.

Where the artists use their medium particularly effectively is in the comic's wordless opening, which highlights the brutality of the world the book is introducing. The depiction of Pellegrini remorselessly shooting his erstwhile friend Luca in the jungle succeeds in conveying much more than just straightforward plot points. The first three pages depict an alligator on the river, and a pelican diving in to catch a fish (Carlotto et al. 2004: 3) before being caught and eaten by the alligator which, we learn in the next panel, is in the sights of Luca's revolver (4-5). Luca shoots the alligator but soon he too is dead in the water (literally), having been shot by Pellegrini (6-7). The zooming in and out is suspenseful, from close-ups of the animals to views of the river or the surrounding jungle, and the muddy green colour scheme conveys not so much an exotic wilderness location as an ominous atmosphere and squalid existence. This river scene, which is almost devoid of words, ends with a close-up of the claws of a vulture as it lands on the alligator's body (9).

In the novel, there is a dead alligator in the water when Luca is shot (Carlotto 2000: 7) — it is symbolic of a shift in Carlotto's style, as he leaves behind his old antihero, a private investigator known as *l'Alligatore* – but this imagery of the cycle of death is not present. In fact, the notion of this unforgiving cycle does not reflect the path Carlotto's original story goes down, with Pellegrini emerging a winner through ruthless strategising. The fact that the creators of the comic, one of whom is Carlotto himself, have given the text this new spin becomes all the more striking at the end. As Pellegrini stands at Roberta's graveside playing the part of the grieving partner, with the song still running through his head, he is suddenly shot dead by his only surviving accomplice from the armed robbery, a Spanish anarchist named Francisca (Carlotto et al. 2005: 48). While this retribution is consistent with the adaptation's early emphasis on the cycle of violence and death, it means it sends quite a different message from the novel. Part of the ethical and political power, or *impegno* (cf. Frezzato 2016), of the novel is that Pellegrini does *not* get his just deserts, but rather goes from strength to strength, aided and emboldened by a deeply corrupt society, whose true nature is thus laid bare for readers. It is possible to view the comic's elimination of Pellegrini as having an ethics of its own, however. Given the difficulty of preserving all the novel's contextual detail and social commentary, this new ending could be considered a way for the comic to send a strong message about criminality (and one woman's revenge), though it is a very different message from that of the novel.

## Rewritings for new audiences

Research in adaptation studies reminds us that we seem to have an almost endless appetite for adaptations, for re-encountering familiar stories told in new ways (Hutcheon 2006), while the increasing trend towards transmediality means that we are starting to see content circulate almost simultaneously across media and across platforms. Transmediality is a significant feature of genre writing in Italy, particularly within the kind of contemporary writing dubbed New Italian Epic (Wu Ming 1 2008: 23), to which Carlotto's *oeuvre* can be seen as belonging. Examples of Italian transmediality include works such as Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (2006) and Giancarlo De Cataldo's *Romanzo criminale* (2002) and *Suburra* (Bonini & De Cataldo 2013), which have appeared in multiple iterations: first as books, later as films, and then as television series. Similarly, Gianrico Carofiglio has redeployed some minor characters from his series of crime novels based around the lawyer Guerrieri in a graphic novel (Carofiglio & Carofiglio 2007). In short, cross-textual and cross-media rewritings are ubiquitous, and possibly essential to a text's survival (cf. Lefevere & Bassnett 1990: 10).

Yet adaptations are often seen as works of lesser value than their sources and, as Linda Hutcheon notes, "disparaging opinions on adaptation as a secondary mode – belated and therefore derivative — persist" (2006: xiii). She also observes that "the morally loaded discourse of fidelity [that pervades criticism of adaptations] is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text" (7), whereas actually the cross-media work an adaptation performs is often of quite a different sort. Hutcheon could just as well be talking about translation here, as it, too, is often plagued by an obsession with faithfulness. Yet, as translation scholars André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett have noted, our focus should be on how a target text functions in the target culture: translators can be considered faithful "when they deliver what those who commission their translations want" (1990: 8). Similarly, Robert Stam (2002: 219-220) notes how, in adaptation studies, discussions in recent years "have moved from a moralistic discourse of fidelity and betrayal to a less judgemental discourse of intertextuality" (see also Cattrysse 1992). Like the transfer of focus to context, culture and audience in translation studies, this shift opens out the discussion considerably.

So, while I note the reduced strength and visibility in the film and comic-book adaptations of an ethical message about widespread corruption and the elite's role in the gradual sanitation of the protagonist's violent past through *riabilitazione*, it is important to acknowledge that this can be attributed in large part to the change in "language", or rather mode. As Flavia Cavaliere has observed of the film adaptation of Saviano's *Gomorra*, one of the great difficulties arises from "the reliance of film on dialogue and the need to render the detailed information provided in the book as a visual experience" (2010: 174). In the case of *Arrivederci amore, ciao*, the addition of the visual mode privileges those elements that lend themselves to visualisation (for example, physical violence and dramatic heists), while other aspects of crime – such as tactical details, social context, strategic interpersonal relationships, psychological violence, hypocrisy, intimidation and exploitation – are far less evident. Such changes to the storyline inevitably change its impact. If, as Carlotto states, the role of the plot is to bring out the truth behind what is taking place in Italy, making the noir a truly social novel ("*la trama serve a far emergere le verità del territorio [...] Il noir in Italia è un vero e proprio romanzo sociale*") (quoted in Canetta & Milanesi 2009), then it is important to acknowledge that the social commentary becomes a good deal less evident in these adaptations.

Just as the audience of a translation might be less interested than the source-text audience in certain details of the history or politics of a source-text culture that is foreign to them, the same might be said here. The comic-book adaptation is clearly aimed at readers of short, action-packed crime comics rather than, say, readers of graphic novels, which often

combine the visual with many features of the literary text. Similarly, the commercially produced film directed by Michele Soavi, whose apprenticeship was with *giallo* masters Lamberto Bava and Dario Argento, needs to fit within the time limits of a typical feature film and retain its audience's attention throughout, in order to recoup the sizeable investment such a venture requires. These differences do not necessarily lead to the story becoming more violent in the comic or film, but there is a change in the nature of the violence: it becomes more personal – between individuals (many of them quite unsavoury and far removed from most readers' and viewers' day-to-day lives) rather than also existing at a systemic, societal level, as in the novel. As contemporary trends in transmediality mean that cultural production moves beyond traditional boundaries, onto different platforms at the hands of a wider range of producers, thus reaching larger and more varied audiences (Wu Ming 1 2008: 23-24), we should not lose sight of the fact that new modes and audiences bring with them different needs, expectations and restrictions. Wu Ming 1 describes New Italian Epic as characterised by narrative complexity with popular spin ("*complessità narrativa, attitudine popolare [sic]*") (2008: 17); this is certainly true of Carlotto's novel, but some of that complexity is reduced in its translation to other media, as the representation of violence in Italian society is adjusted for new circumstances and audiences.

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