1. An Iranian Herzog:

A Study of Dariush Mehrjui's Screen Adaptation of Saul Bellow's Herzog

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Abstract:

Regarded as one of the twentieth century's most eminent authors, Saul Bellow (1915 – 2005) has had a huge influence on other artists. His works address the disordering nature of modern civilization, and the ability of humans to find their way in this disorder and achieve greatness and/or awareness. His sixth novel, Herzog (1964), has been regarded as a classic by many critics. The novel centers on a middle-aged college professor who is entangled in a traumatic situation and undergoes a severe identity crisis. The Iranian film Hamoun (1989) is a free adaptation of this novel. Its director, Dariyush Mehrjoui (1940-) is a well-known Iranian filmmaker who has been regarded as a master of adaptation in Iran. In this film Mehrjoui tries to portray an Iranian intellectual in a situation similar to that of Herzog, rendering through this character the complex socio-political and cultural situation of post-revolutionary Iran. The present paper focuses on the ways Mehrjui manages to achieve this aim, with the objective of offering insight into the political and cultural atmosphere of the modernized and post-revolutionary Iran.

Keywords:

Adaptation, Intercultural Adaptation, Iran, Herzog, Mehrjui, Bellow, Hamoun.

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Introduction

After a century of cinema, a huge change can be seen both in the style and form of movies. Yet even after a hundred years, the focus of mainstream cinema is still telling and retelling stories, and "most of those stories are still being (or have been) appropriated from literary or dramatic sources" (Welsh 2007, xiii). Adaptation has always "been central to the process of filmmaking since almost the beginning and could well maintain its dominance into the cinema's second century" (Ibid.). Filmmakers use various strategies in their adaptations, in response to and in negotiations with different cultural, political and commercial needs.

Despite the prevalence of adaptation and appropriation in filmmaking, the field of adaptation is still very much "understudied, or in some aspects, un-studied" (Qin 2007, 1). Despite efforts to shed new lights into adaptation theory, "fidelity criticism" still dominates studies in the field. The notion of "fidelity", the assumption that the original is a touchstone of value, still dominates adaptation studies today, usually leading to the conclusion that "the book was better!" There are arguments that "the medium of film has its limitations, that it is epidermal, even superficial, that it cannot probe the depths of psychology or emotional consciousness" (Welsh 2007, xiii). Countering these charges are the achievements of masters such as "Ingmar Bergman in Sweden, of Michelangelo Antonioni in Italy, and of Yasujiro Ozu or Akira Kurosawa in Japan" in adaptation (Ibid.). It is the case that "adaptation studies, by borrowing the cultural cachet of literature, [seeks] to claim its institutional respectability and gravitas even while insuring adaptation's enduring aesthetic and methodological subordination to literature proper" (Leitch 2008, 64).

Filmic adaptations of literature, since they have a textual source for one to refer to, offer "a convenient venue to address broader questions about culture, history and politics. The deletions, additions and other changes the filmmakers choose to make highlight their strategies in ways that may not be so obvious in films made from original scripts" (Qin 2007, 2). Films based on the same source but made at different times, or "the change of adaptation styles of the same filmmaker in different periods, can particularly show the dynamics of […] history as well as the mutual influence between culture and history" (Ibid.). A comparative reading of the films and the literature they are based on may render consistent patterns across individual films and filmmakers. Such patterns may be interpreted in cultural and political terms, offering thus insights into the cultural and political history of a given society. The present study aims at offering such insights into the socio-political and

cultural conditions of post-revolutionary Iran through the work of Dariush Mehrjoui, "the father of modern Iranian cinema" (Wright 2000, 140). Most of Mehrjoui's masterpieces are adaptations of works written by great figures such as Ibsen, Salinger, Bellow, and famous Iranian writers such as Sa'edi, Taraghi, and Moradi-Kermani. His 1989 film *Hamun* is a free adaptation of Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964). Rather than seeking similarities between the film and Bellow's book and therefore determining the degree of Mehrjui's "fidelity" to Bellow's novel, the article will explore the ways Mehrui re-creates Bellow's intellectual protagonist and other characters in the context of post-revolutionary Iranian society.

Discussion

In the act of transposition and in the *shift* from one medium or genre or context into another, adaptation is considered a form of translation. And, like translation, it is treated differently. Just as some traditionalists are never satisfied with the translated work since it is to them, always a minor, secondary version never as good as the original, there are those for whom adaptation has never the "original" values of the "source" work. And also, as some prefer totally faithful translations, there are those who prefer faithful adaptations, i.e. works that are totally based in form and content on the "original" text. According to Richard Burt, "adaptation does not mean that one author substitutes for the other (film director for playwright), but that the authorship of a given adaptation is always in question." (as cited in Preston Leonard 2009, 10).

Such traditional attitudes to adaptations are today being replaced by attitudes that question the notion of the source as a "touchstone" for the evaluation of the adaptation. Opposing those critical views whose focus of analysis is fidelity to the adapted text, and also those assumptions that consider adaptation simply a "reproduction" of the adapted text, Hutcheon regards adaptation as "repetition, but repetition without replication" (2006 p. 7). She sees adaptation from three perspectives: First, "as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" (Ibid.). Second, "as *a process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging" (Ibid., 8). And third, "from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Ibid.). She finally describes adaptation in short as "a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary" (Ibid., 9). Casettee sees adaptation not as a replication of an original work, but as a "*reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere*" (2004, 82, original emphasis). In this reappearance, "what matters is the development of a new communicative situation, more than simply the similarity or dissimilarity between the later and

earlier events" (Ibid.). Thus, what matters is "the new role and place that the later event takes on within the discursive field, more than the abstract faithfulness that it can claim with respect to the source text. In fact, the text's identity is defined more by this role and this place than by a series of formal elements" (Ibid.).

Adaptations are evidently increasing in number. This is partly due to the need to move the work, especially a culturally approved work, out of its limiting framework of medium, genre, etc. One of the different types of adaptation is to introduce a work hailed as a work of "high culture" to popular culture. In this way the borders between high and low culture are blurred and the work is received by a larger group of people, released from the territory of a certain group of people, the so-called "elite". This is one of the reasons adaptation studies fit in the larger category of cultural studies. This quality of connecting high and low culture is also one of the reasons for dissatisfaction towards adaptation. As Hutcheon puts it, "[even in our postmodern age of cultural recycling, something – perhaps the commercial success of adaptations – would appear to make us uneasy" (2006, 3).

Among adaptations, some are free from the rules and frameworks of the adapted text, resulting in free works with independent identities. These works are largely called "appropriations". While adaptation openly announces or, as Sanders puts it, "signals a relationship with an informing source-text or original", appropriation "affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (2006, 26). The appropriated texts "are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. They may occur in a far less straightforward context than is evident in making a film version of a canonical play" (Ibid.). Of such works intercultural adaptations are particularly significant. Hutcheon refers to this as "indigenization", a term borrowed from anthropology. Whether the adapted story is told or shown, "it always happens in a particular time and space in a society" (Hutcheon 2006, 144). In Hutcheon's idea, there is "a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced, and that in which they are received and both are in dialogue with the works themselves" (Ibid. 149). Intercultural adaptations "constitute transformations of previous works in new contexts. Local particularities become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results" (Ibid. 150). Mehrjoui's Hamoun is an intercultural adaptation, setting the American Herzog in the post-revolutionary Iranian society.

A Perplexed Intellectual in Modern American Society

"Every novelist is a historian; a chronicler of his time"

Saul Bellow

In 1964 Saul Bellow's sixth novel, *Herzog* was published. Even before the publication of this novel, Bellow was regarded as the best portrayer of American society. Bellow's "ability to capture and render the 'zeitgeist', his eye for concrete detail, the accuracy in tone, style and dialect usage of the voice or voices one hears in the novels have been attributed to his position as both an outsider and a participant in American society" (Kirstein 1980, 6). It is not the social picture itself, but "the internal battle that each of Bellow's protagonists has to fight to come to accept both himself and the social reality in which he is placed" (Kirstein 1980, 7) that forms the core of Bellow's novels. A quest for and "recognition of values in a given social context is the spring that sets these characters into motion" (Ibid.). Among Bellow's novels, *Herzog* is the one in which he most truly portrays himself. Most critics believe that Herzog is "the protagonist who most closely resembles his creator" (Ibid.). The novel is centred on a middle-aged college professor named Moses Herzog. He has made the habit of writing letters which he never sends, to family, friends, acquaintances, scholars, writers, and even the historical figures.

Herzog, the protagonist of the novel, is a middle-aged college professor whose career has recently stumbled. He writes letter which he never sends to various people including the dead. These letters play an important role in the novel. Herzog married twice, both leading to divorce. His second marriage failed when he was 47. He has two children, one from each marriage, none of which live with the father. He has formed a relationship with a lady, Ramona, but he cannot accept any commitment. The reason may be the betrayal of his second wife. The novel opens with Herzog in his house in Ludeyville. He is thinking about coming back to New York to meet Ramona, but instead escapes to Martha's Vineyard to see some friends. To regain custody of his daughter, Junie, he heads to New York. When in the courthouse to meet his lawyer to discuss his plans, he observes a series of tragicomic court hearings. He prepares a gun with two bullets in it, decided to kill his second wife, Madeleine and her lover, Valentine and run off with Junie. He sees Valentine giving Junie a bath and realizes that Junie is in no danger. He is in a car accident and charged with possession of a loaded weapon. His brother, the rational Will, picks him up and tries to get him back on his feet. Herzog heads to Ludeyville. Ramona comes up to join him for a night and Herzog begins making plans to fix up the house and his life. The novel closes with Herzog saying that he doesn't need to write any more letters.

Herzog is regarded as "the quintessential twentieth century American victim" (Gerson 1977, 70). He is "a modern American Adam who has been beaten by life and who initially seeks escape in visions of Eden rather than confronting his traumatic experiences" (Ibid.). Throughout most of the novel Herzog have traumatic experiences. His family life is a failure. His first wife got divorce and his second wife has left him to get divorce and live with his best friend. Also, his second wife blames him for his family crisis, warning the police about him and his dangerous mental state. He is not allowed to see his child and this has made him even more broken. He also suffers for the pains of other people. Whenever he thinks of others' problems, he is overwhelmed by pain and remorse. All these troubles have made him a deeply tormented man.

More than any other Bellow protagonist, Herzog "epitomizes the modern, twentieth century American who is completely overwhelmed and broken by life" (Ibid. 73). He "seeks to escape his troubled life by envisioning utopias" (Ibid. 74). He runs away to Martha's Vineyard to get away from his pains, and he plans to seclude in his home in Ludeyville, Massachusetts, which is surrounded by trees and grass. In this place Herzog hopes that he can "rid himself of city traumas and recapture the innocence and peace synonymous with Eden" (Ibid. 75). Of course, as it becomes clear in the novel, this house turns to be anything but a calm and peaceful place. Instead of giving him peace to get away from his troubles, the place offers him nothing but "a howling emptiness" (Bellow 1974, 39). His letter writing habit too can be seen as a way through which he expresses both his traumatic state of mind and his desire for order. This habit helps him, as it gives him insight into himself and his problems.

Gradually, Herzog realizes that instead of hiding from his problems and escaping into his Eden-like utopias, he needs to fight them. He finds that "a search for paradise is futile" and that "man must adapt to life rather than flee it" (Gerson 1977, p. 79). He comes to reconcile with life, and, at the end of the novel, while Herzog is still traumatized by all his experiences, it is implied that "Herzog has come to accept life's ambiguities, is recuperating from his traumas, and in time will successfully adapt to the world" (Ibid. 70).

Hamoun: The Stormy World of Intellect and Passion

In 1969, an Iranian filmmaker introduced a new mode of filmmaking that was to leave an indelible mark on the Iranian cinema. The filmmaker was the young Dariush Mehrjui, who had just finished his education in US, in philosophy, and who, with his seminal offering *Gav* (The Cow) presented a different picture of Iranian society, its people and their sensibilities. *The Cow* was based on a famous novel by Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi, a well-known political writer in pre-revolutionary Iran,

and was the first film to present an unflattering sketch of the countryside. It was a bleak film that the Ministry of Culture and Arts, which was ironically also its producer, demanded major changes before it would issue an exhibition permit (the book had also suffered from censorship). The cast came from a theatrical background and had no connection with the Iranian commercial cinema of the day. Of the significant points about the film is that it was among the first films hailed by most critics as a successful adaptation, something rarely told about adaptations before Mehrjui's film, and something that continued to be told about Mehrjui's films, among them Hamoun (1989).

Like Herzog, Hamoun "centred on a man on the verge of losing his job, his wife and his mind" (Sadr 2006, 245). The protagonist, Hamid Hamoun, is a frustrated middle-aged man who is desperately working on his PhD thesis in a tumultuous life. His wife, Mahshid, is having an affair and has been driven by his obsessiveness to ask him for a divorce. In a series of flashbacks and dreams, Hamoun reviews his life and tries to figure out what he did wrong.

Sadr defines the character of the "intellectual" in terms of four major traits: "deep insecurity, political cynicism, personal mistrust and self-destruction" (2006, 254). Sadr goes on to argue that "no other psychological theme has featured so prominently in the discussion of Iranian cinema as that of insecurity" (Ibid.). This theme and its relationship to several other character traits and attitudes in the context of contemporary politics were most fully developed in the film *Hamoun* (1989). Mehrjui was "the representative of intellectuals in this period, and *Hamoun*, a landmark of Iranian cinema, captured their sense of malaise. Though non-commercial, this psychodrama was highly popular in Iran, especially with young audiences" (Ibid.). The movie ranked the best movie in Iranian history in a 1997 poll of Iranian film critics and audiences.

Torn between dreams and reality, passive against both society and his wife, Hamoun is experiencing an existential crisis. He is a frustrated intellectual who takes on job after job, not because he is in search of wealth, but in order to protest against social wrongs. Externally, Hamoun is a man of great physical vitality and charm; internally, he is weak. He brings "a raw, even brutal, masculinity to the screen, slapping his wife's face in one scene, an act which masks his own vulnerability. But the association of sexuality with violence is challenged here" (Ibid.). Mehrjui puts Hamoun's physical strength and his masculinity besides the fact that he is internally a little boy in search of his mother-figure. Mehrjui takes pains to show the "emptiness of his world – his barren apartment and his scattered papers symbolizing his state of mind. For all his loud pretense, he has no real control over the circumstances of his life. He is a confused, uncertain, threatened, ordinary man" (Ibid.).

Herzog Has a Good Time in Iran

Cinema is one of the major media through which the complexities of post-revolutionary Iranian private life have been depicteded, and *Hamoun* is among the most significant instances which depicts such issues. Though non-commercial, "this psychodrama was highly popular in Iran, especially with young audiences" (Sadr 2006, 254). Mehrjoui took the figure of Herzog beyond cliché towards a more interesting and rounded portrayal of a character who "talked frankly about sex, employment and money, and was in a sense a new kind of rebel, questioning the values and limitations of those around him" (Ibid.). Hamoun is a complex character and is still referred to as one of the unique examples of characterization in Iranian cinema.

Anguish and tortured self-examination has long been part of the heroic experience, but they are brought to the surface in this obsessive, misguided intellectual. Shakibai defined this type of personality in the early 1990s. However much the audience thrilled to Shakibai as a physical male, his image is modified by the perception that he is often no more than "a scared little boy who cries for his forgotten past and for his mother" (Sadr 2006, 254). When he understands that his wife is having an affair, he bursts into tears. Without her, he is helpless. "instead of the domineering, educated handsome man he had seemed earlier in the film, he is revealed as a needy person, whose anger with his wife stems from his own weakness" (Ibid.).

Herzog's split character and his being entangled between tradition and modernity in American modern society is subtly transposed to an Iranian context. Herzog, as we know, is a Jewish character who tries to establish his Jewish identity in a society that does not recognize this identity. Mehrjoui highlights the protagonist's quest for identity by emphasizing his religious backgrounds. Hamoun has been raised in a strictly religious family. Mehrjoui highlights this religious background in the film in different ways. There are scenes in the film that show Hamoun's childhood. In those scenes we see their house, which is the typical archaic type in which religious and traditional Iranians live. As the child Hamoun runs in the alleys, we realize that his family is living in a traditional district of the city. Mehrjoui highlights Hamoun's religious background with the scene in which his family is holding a religious ceremony, cooking and distributing food on Ashura (the day on which Imam Hussain, the third Shi'eh Imam, was martyred). We also see traces of his traditional background in his youth appearance.

With Mahshid, Hamoun is thrown into a hasty, distorted modernity. In the novel, Madeleine is Herzog's second wife, and his divorced wife's name is Daisy. If Daisy was the symbol of order and symmetry for Herzog, and if with her, Herzog "had led the perfectly ordinary life of an assistant

professor, respected and stable" (Bellow 1974, 13), Madeleine baffles Herzog from the beginning. She is intense, passionate, never as "cool" and "regular" as Daisy. Herzog feels passive and perplexed with her, and sees that "there [is] a flavor of subjugation in his love for Madeleine" (Ibid. 16). Hamoun has the same feeling toward Mahshid. He cannot understand her, her studies, her shift from painting to fashion design, and more than anything else, her wildness. Like Herzog, who, after the failure of his second marriage, starts seeking order in his life, Hamoun begins craving order after his life with Mahshid turns into discontent and anguish.

Herzog's wives and Hamoun's wife can also be seen as some aspects of the protagonists' characters. Daisy was the calm, regular aspect of Herzog's character and Madeleine was his passionate and illogical side. And in *Hamoun*, Mahshid is the grotesque version of Hamoun himself. Like Hamoun, she has a disordered mind, and, especially like the initial stages of Hamoun's character development, she does not know exactly what she wants. Her jumping from one activity to another highlights this disorder and aimlessness. Hamoun at least learns to find the roots of the problems inside his own self, but Mahshid is too weak to consider herself responsible for her own problems, and blames others, especially Hamoun, for her troubles. She is rather a show-off of intellectuality, than a true intellectual.

The depiction of Herzog in the form of a believable Iranian intellectual is also related to another figure, the Iranian actor Khosro Shakibayi (1944 – 2008). The film launched the career of this actor as one of the most successful actors of the 1990s. The film "benefits greatly from his performance, and from that of Bita Farahi, who plays his wife, as the two battle out their jealousies and neuroses, revealing their deepest feelings" (Ibid.). The commercial and artistic success of a cinematic masterpiece is to a great extent the result of "performance". Casting has a significant role in this. Mehrjui chose actors who could best express the characters' complexities. Shakibayi's performance was to a great extent the main cause of having a charming Iranian Herzog.

Giving a mystic aspect to the protagonist is also among Mehrjui's subtle ways in creating the Iranian Herzog. Hamoun has a friend named "Ali Abedini", with whom he has made friends since childhood, and through whom he has got familiar with Islamic mysticism and Abrahamic love. Apparently Abedini is an ordinary man; he wears normal clothes and works on the buildings. But we see gradually that Hamoun's relationship with this man is that of disciple and master. It can be said that Abedini and Hamoun are the symbolic Abraham and Ismail. What is striking about this character is that he is not depicted like typical mystic figures in solitude and constant prayer. Instead, he is shown inside society and the real flow of life. Abedini is the part of Hamoun's character and religious background that is missing in the distorted modern life in which he is situated. And he is a key figure to Hamoun's search for identity and order.

We should also note that part of the great success of this Herzog adaptation in Iran geos back to the context of the receiver, that is, the post-revolutionary Iranian society. *Hamoun* talks also about the end of a period of intellectualism in Iran, a turbulent, radical intellectualism which, as the film suggests, was to be replaced by mysticism. As Dabashi argues, the Islamic Revolution, "in effect one massively orchestrated, ideological Islamization of a constitutionally polyvocal culture, has been chiefly responsible for this artistic turn to the metaphysical" (2002, 134). Mehrju'i's masterpieces before the Revolution were the outcome of close contact with one of the greatest Iranian dramatists in modernity, Gholam-Hoseyn Sa'edi. "Sa'edi's suicidal urges in the aftermath of the Revolution, which ended in 1985 in his deliberately drinking himself to death, undoubtedly left Mehrju'i morally and psychologically depleted" (Dabashi 2002, 135). Most of Mehrju'i's films after Sa'edi's death "have inclined to a fatalistic mysticism from which he has never recovered" (Ibid.).

The final sequence of the film is particularly significant. As mentioned in Herzog section, Herzog gradually comes to reconcile with life, and, at the end of the novel, he realizes that instead of hiding from his troubles, he should confront and fight them. In *Hamoun*, Mehrjui shows this reconciliation in another way. Anguished and totally broken at the end of the film, Hamoun commits suicide by trying to drown himself in the sea. However, the last scene of the film reveals that he is saved, and the most important thing is that his savior is Ali Abedini, for whom he searched throughout the film. Merging in the water, and especially the sea, is Hamoun's way to purge himself. But his being saved by Abedini offers another solution: His grasping of Abedini's mysticism, the kind of mysticism that rejects total seclusion, puts Herzog's reconciliation and success at the end of the novel in the Iranian context. Abedini's mysticism is a way to save the modern intellectual in the post-revolutionary Iran. What Mehrjoui suggested in *Hamoun* as the solution to the crisis of intellectualism in post-revolutionary Iran is to turn to a mysticism which both purifies and promotes an active social life.

Conclusion

Mehrjui creates a believable Iranized Herzog. His adaptation is a success in what Hutcheon calls "transculturation or indigenization" (2006, xvi), with which a work finds new meanings in new contexts. Bellow's frustrated intellectual, with a Jewish background and most similar to Bellow, is presented as a distressed man, with religious roots and in search of his true identity and meaning of life. Through subtle use of filmic devices and techniques such as long takes, slow motion, close-up and lighting techniques, and using structural and thematic devices, Mehrjui succeeds in moving Saul Bellow's protagonist across culture, language, and history and create an Iranian Herzog entangled with the complexities of Iranian socio-cultural forces. It should be noted that in the film's opening

there is no reference to Bellow and Herzog, and in interviews with Mahrjoui, he usually mentioned Hedayat's *Bouf-e Kour* (The Blind Owl, 1936) as a source of inspiration for *Hamoun*. Yet the film's being based on the novel is mentioned by many critics, and becomes clear with a cursorylook at the book and the film. Whatever were Mehrjui's intentions in doing this, and whether it is a righteous act or not, the important fact is that the character Bellow has created is not simply presented to Iranians. He has become so deeply rooted in Iranian culture and society, that, without a knowledge of the source of its adaptation, it would be hard to believe that this character has come from somewhere other than Iran.

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