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“Des personnages de si près tenus”, TV Fiction and Moral Consensus

Abstract

How can we understand the adaptations of literary classics made for French television? We simultaneously analyzed the works and the context in which they were produced in order to relate the moral configurations that emerge in the stories to activities carried out by identifiable members of the production team, in specific, empirically observable circumstances. This empirical approach to the constitution of the moral panorama in which characters evolve rejects the idea of the pure autonomy of ideological contents, suggesting instead a study of the way normative demands and professional ethics are combined in practice, thus combining a sociology of characters and a sociology of professionals and showing how professional priorities influence production choices. This detaches the moral question from the philosophical horizon it is associated with in order to make it an object of empirical study. Adopting this perspective produces unexpected findings. Observation shows that the moral landscape in which characters are located is neither stable, autonomous, transparent, or consensual. It is instead caught up in material logics, constrained by temporal dynamics, and dependent on professional coordination. It is traversed by tensions between professional logics, and logics of regulation.

Keywords

Fiction; Television; Literary adaptations; Moral sociology; Television production ethnography; Characters and moral life

French television offers fictional programming that is the object of recurrent criticism. It is criticized for presenting characters who are too smooth, too wise, too accommodating. Such criticism can be found in the press, written by critics, but it is also widely voiced by professionals, as well, who complain about the tone of French television and about the “moral order” that reigns in its fictional programming. The work I am presenting here seeks neither to express this criticism, nor to argue with it, but to look at it and see where it leads. French televised fiction is considered highly structured on a normative level; the characters it presents are often positive heroes, the realm of their explorations is seen as confined to certain acceptable activities. In this study I wish to take the opportunity to understand more precisely the way, at a given moment, in the heart of the televisual institution, this ranking of acceptable actions is established. How are moral consensuses formed, what is the nature of the

final decisions, how is responsibility collectively taken for the consolidation of this normative order?

This article aims less to look at the content of this moral order – which is the object of other facets of my work that have been developed elsewhere – than at the way in which it is formed. The question raised consists in knowing whether it is possible to grasp, from a sociological perspective, the practical way in which these normative contents are developed. For a long time ideological criticism has dealt with the content as if it were “already there,” and then the work of the sociologist consisted simply of revealing the ideological structure of the texts of mass culture, the way one would dig the skeleton of a dinosaur out of the sand, that solid, consistent and stable framework that kept society and its plans together. But if one adheres to a less deterministic view of the social order, one is led to move the center of sociological attention to the very genesis of these productions. The approach suggested in this work therefore proposes to simultaneously analyze the works and the context in which they are produced in order to relate the moral configurations that emerge in the stories to activities carried out by identifiable persons, in specific, empirically observable circumstances. To do this it proposes an ethnographic analysis of the processes of writing and of producing televised works of fiction.

How the Study Was Carried Out

The study whose preliminary results I wish to sketch here deals with *literary adaptations for television*. It concerns mainly adaptations of novels, short stories, tales or comic strips, in televised fictions (TV films or cartoons) intended for adults or children. Such works existed in written form before being adapted for television. By authors as diverse as Homer, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Paul Féval, Emile Zola, Hector Malo, Jules Renard, Daniel Defoe, Hergé or Goscinny and works like the *Odyssey*, *Le Comte de Monte Cristo*, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, *Les Misérables*, *Le Bossu*, *Nana*, *Sans Famille*, *Poil de Carotte*, *Tintin* ou *Robinson Crusoe*, etc. The advantage of this corpus of literary adaptations was that the original texts provided a point of departure for comparison: it was possible to contrast the film versions with the literature that had inspired them and thus to discover almost cartographically the transformations of their moral ideals.

The investigation follows the different stages of the production of works of televised fiction, from conception to completion, in three film production companies, in public television stations, during filming, festivals, and press screenings. It consisted of an ethnographic immersion, interviews, and an investigation among hand-picked informants familiar with the problematics of this study and trained to gather the type of material sought after. Attention was focused not on the functioning of the professional environments, but on the influence that carrying out their activities had on the development of the characters.

I carried out my inquiries on the functioning of the professional environments in 1988, and then later on in successive waves. Working this way enabled me to observe the changes which have occurred in the organization of French television and their consequences on the manufacture of contents. Because I was seeking to understand the change of the characters' aspirations, I was led to undertake an entire network of inquiries among scriptwriters, directors, producers, actors, make-up artists, costumers, sound engineers, cameramen, etc., in order to understand how the latter had understood them and tried to make them concrete. Indeed, characters are dependent on a large number of participants who, from one end of the chain of production to the other, intervene to define them. The division of artistic labour is

accompanied with what one may call a division of moral work which attributes to each one a particular place, which needs to be described, in the production of these assemblages of morality.

For this reason, the issue of the making of the moral landscape in which the characters evolve – an issue which is at the heart of my concerns - breaks up into several questions that need to be addressed simultaneously. First of all, one needs to understand the place of each professional body in the construction of all characters and in the development of what will constitute their common world. It is necessary then, for each trade, to understand what is linked to professional requirements or to concerns of general ethics properly speaking. Professional requirements are identified according to criteria related to optimal conditions to accomplish its mission. Concerns of general ethics are related to a diagnosis of the state of the society and the values which, from the point of view of the TV professionals, can, have to or do not have to, be defended by the characters.

This study thus looks at the different participants involved in the production of an audiovisual work and at the way they successively assume responsibility for the question of the morality of the fictional world. To achieve this, it follows the entirety of their activities in sequential order while proposing an ethnography of their concerns as they are expressed through criticisms, complaints, demands, or disappointments, at every level of the chain of production, as a function of the characteristics unique to each profession. The idea, and perhaps the originality, of this study is that it gathers the assessments, critical or self-critical, that the various protagonists express among themselves, address to the work or to its characters, without distinguishing those that bear on the conditions in which their professions are exercised and those that bear on the traits of the characters.

This methodology is tied to the very specific nature of the products: it is not *objects*, but *subjects* that come out of the chain of production. The dynamics of production is a dynamics of incarnation. The chain of production engenders beings who are endowed with morality and reason. The characters have a sense of good and evil, aspirations concerning the way in which they should conduct their lives, and interpretations about the reasons that prevent them from achieving their ideals. But at the same time, the way they manifest these traits depends on the more or less successful way they have been constructed. Therefore, the judgements to which they are subjected by those who create them, mix judgements *on what they do* and judgements *on the way they have been created*. If one wants to understand how professional logics play a role in the definition of moral contents, it is thus necessary to observe the articulation between these two dimensions, the way this articulation is made explicit and evolves. And in order to do so, one needs to follow in detail all the operations which constitute the chain of production.

The Concerns of the Adaptor

The task of reconciling the diverse imperatives falls in the most detailed and most imperative way to authors/adaptors. To create a credible story adaptors must reevaluate the entire moral architecture of the text given to them. Their work consists of bringing together a certain number of temporal scales: the time in which the story takes place; that of the time when the novel was written (sometimes several centuries later); the successive cinematographic or televisual adaptations that have already been made; and the times in which they are living – or that they can envision in the future. Dealing with periods very distant from each other places adaptors in a very unique situation. Because they cannot be content simply to note the differences that

arise, in a vague feeling of cultural relativism, they must act upon them. They must reduce them, like a surgeon reduces a fracture. They must derive the consequences of the transformations that arise and undertake a work of reevaluation of the different elements available to reorganize the plots while retaining credible characters in a new context. They who are on the front lines: their professional competence will be evaluated according to their ability to rearticulate the moral horizons.

In order to impose his own professional priorities, the scriptwriter/adaptor must begin by energetically fighting against all sorts of established hierarchies. When a writer undertakes an adaptation of a classical text for television he begins by upsetting all sorts of hierarchies. He changes the nature of the work he is dealing with and whose original status he is degrading. He seizes the text, takes it apart, cuts it into pieces, explodes it. He turns a completed text into an incomplete text. The tale was closed, now it is opened up. However majestic, however brilliant it once was, it is stripped down to become a simple draft, which feeds a script that is itself only a document of preparation, because in the audiovisual world what is written down is always in a subordinate position. The original text is downgraded. Modernization imposes a de-ranking.

This involves not only the text. It also involves the organization of labor. In this first phase, and that concerns the sketching of the moral landscape in which the characters evolve, the scriptwriters, not the directors, have the most important role. Directors emphasize or strengthen a trait but the decisive gesture does not belong to them. This statement reverses the situation as it has been established in France, where the director is seen as the principal author of the televised work. From the point of view that concerns us – and which is perhaps most important in relation to the sociological question of the influence of the mass media – the study begins by upsetting a double hierarchy: the hierarchy of works that placed the original masterpiece above the script, and the professional hierarchy that placed the director above the scriptwriter.

The work of the adaptor for television consists less in taking up a general challenge concerning the inter-understanding of cultures than in isolating elements that appear impossible to transpose. Indeed, unlike theater directors who are constrained by respect for the texts they are interpreting, the television scriptwriter is free to take great liberties with the original text. He isn't concerned with being faithful to the work. However, he must assure the transition between highly differentiated anthropological models and find solutions so that the new text makes sense in the civilization in which he is working.

Let's look at an example. On December 22, 2003 France 2 aired an adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* written by Frédéric Vitoux, directed by Thierry Chabert and starring Pierre Richard. In the first scenes Robinson is out on the open sea in a dinghy. He hasn't been shipwrecked, as in the original novel, but had fought with the commander who, out of greed, wanted to return to Guinea to increase his profits with a new shipment of slaves. Robinson Crusoe had protested and was put off the ship. One must note that these scruples are not in the novel. In the book (Dafoe 1978) the character had set off on his expedition with an impassioned enthusiasm:

In my Discourses among them [fellow-planters and merchants], I had frequently given them an Account of my two Voyages to the Coast of *Guinea*, the manner of Trading with the *Negroes* there, and how easy it was to purchase upon the Coast, for Trifles, such as Beads, Toys, Knives, Scissars, Hatchets, bits of Glass, and the like; not only Gold Dust, *Guinea* Grains, Elephants Teeth, &c. but *Negroes* for the Service of the *Brasils*, in great Numbers. (pp. 39-40)

Not only does slavery not pose any problem for Daniel Defoe's Robinson, but, recognizing that "*Negroes were excessive dear*," he eagerly becomes involved in smuggling. One can easily see the adaptor's difficulties when he encountered this passage in the novel. The problem that confronted him is not a moral problem. There is no moral fault in creating horrible and detestable characters. One might even say that this is one of the indelible rights of fiction. Rather it is a problem of logic that relates to the very definition of the characteristics of a hero. Whereas at the beginning of the eighteenth century Robinson could be both a hero and a slave-trader, this situation, three centuries later, is more difficult to uphold. Either he is a hero and works against the exploitation of minorities by coming to their defense and struggling for their freedom – which is what he does in the course of the film; or he remains on the side of the slave traders and then can no longer claim the title of hero. This dilemma is no doubt found in all forms of adaptation but with television it takes on a particularly salient dimension due to the place that normative expectations hold on television, since station executives want their main heroes to be exemplary characters.

Consequently, for a scriptwriter, ensuring the moral and narrative tenor of his story consists of holding together, as tightly as possible, the demands for believability and the moral constraints of acceptability. In the case of literary adaptations, these two phenomena conflict: there is a gap, introduced by temporal distance, between believability and legitimacy, between what is morally acceptable and what is logically coherent. The author is thus forced to twist the text to make it fit into new frameworks, to distance himself, to abandon any reference to the original text: he reorganizes relationships of kinship, adds characters, modifies relational grammars or transforms denouements. But his concern is generally retranslated into the terms of his own professional preoccupations: when a scriptwriter reflects upon what one of his characters "can" or "cannot" do, he doesn't separate the factual dimension and the moral dimension: ethical considerations are not made explicit in an autonomous way. They are buried beneath issues of narrative coherence.

The Concern of Co-producers : General Ethics and Culturalist Routines

The situation is slightly different in the next stage, when the scriptwriter submits his text to the station executives: the moral issues as such are more explicit. If the production is ambitious, it will be expensive. One then enters into the realm of co-production. Securing a budget necessitates the intervention of international partners, each of whom has specific requirements as to how what might be called national televisual norms will be dealt with. Behind the scenes at meetings, in comments on decisions that have been made, representatives of each country/co-producer are designated simply by their first names or by reference to their geographical region, or by the television station with which they are affiliated (one says the French, the Italians, or RAI, France 2). Having become representatives of their "cultures" through this process these participants then propose modifications to the scripts. Each person handles in his own way his sense of the power of the mass media and his responsibilities vis-à-vis his own audiences. In fact, those involved obey different moral imperatives. The countries that are invited to the discussion table are used to proposing changes in details, which allow them, while justifying their presence and their professionalism, to highlight the small specific points to which they are specifically attached, and on which it may be judged advisable to satisfy them. Writers and producers have dozens of stories to tell on this subject, stories through

which they pin national stereotypes onto each of the foreign partners. In the realm of animation, for example, which is particularly sensitive to the question of moral decisions, it is said that the Scandinavian countries are uncompromising about the egalitarian division of heroism between little boys and little girls; that in the adaptation of Tintin, the Americans took Captain Haddock's whisky away, and in that of Lucky Luke insisted that his cigarette be replaced by a blade of grass (in spite of the otherwise suggestive effects that this substitution might have) When Greek mythology is co-produced it is out of the question for Cronus to eat his children. The fact that whales, whose protection is now a priority, have become victims, leads to a serious reevaluation of the treatment of Moby Dick. It is also said that France and the other Latin countries are considered by Anglo-Saxon countries to be particularly lax in what they allow their young people to watch. The round-table discussions are occasions to evaluate these cultural assumptions. The extent of the transformations of scripts is proportional not to the seriousness of the stakes involved, but to the amount of the financial participation of each of the co-producers, which is always frustrating for the small countries. Their moral influence is limited. Their argumentative strength is the weight of their budget.

Art of negotiation among the representatives of the producer countries consists of anticipating the remarks of the foreign partners, while leaving open elements in the scripts. "One must always anticipate the details on which one is willing to give in." Organizing meetings, knowing the participants, identifying regularities, foreseeing the way they will be analyzed by relating them to the person who expresses them, to his society, his station, or his country – all of this is good professional practice. If one shows that someone involved is predictable, that his comments are repetitive and that they are made religiously from one meeting to the next, independent of the content of the program itself, they have a good chance of their being ignored. By showing one's annoyance (squirming, making faces, gestures, crumpling paper, shrugging shoulders, raising one's eyes) or by having the last laugh, one can refocus the direction of remarks: they were directed toward the work, they will be redirected toward the one who made them.

But one must avoid public humiliation, whispering, knowing glances, the importance of coffee breaks to circulate evaluations. Identifying the routines of intervention, leaving the most complicated issues for the end, counting on fatigue and jet lag, using margins of negotiation left open by a slight imprecision in the mastery of the language in which the meetings are held, becoming allusive, jumping back abruptly into one's own language to rally one's supporters, using references incomprehensible to other national groups, employing untranslatable humor – these are some of the tactics one observes during these meetings. They are no doubt found in all spheres of activity that bring together international partners, but the difference here is related to the final product: what is at issue are neither goods nor services, but characters, quasi-people, who are launched into the public arena with the moral characteristics with which they are endowed.

If one considers the foundations upon which consensus is finally established one notes that they are primarily fixed negatively. The moral ideals of the characters are not mentioned, and the field of their explorations is limited. At this stage of the process, regulation is essentially negative. It passes above all through the collective establishment of a list of banned items that continues to be added to as the number of participants is increased. The partners of co-productions do not wish to truly interfere with what creates the internal coherence of the dialogue. In fact, caution demands that international partners not interfere too much with the contents. They remain in the margins of the works. As one writer sums up:

With people from other countries, we can't understand each other. There are too many problems if we go into the details. If we listen to everyone, the film is ruined. For the scripts, it's agony. For the dialogue, it's death! Really! So they will leave us alone we agree to the bans we can respect, and we give good roles to their actors.

What is interesting about this remark is that it goes to the heart of our problematics. What makes it humorous (or perhaps cynical) is that it sums up the givens of the problem: the (ambitious) plan that consists of counting on the universalist inter-understanding of cultures is "swapped" for the (more modest) satisfaction of promoting a handful of national actors.

The Involvement of TV stations

Most often, then, it is on the national level, within the sponsoring station that interventions are most decisive. And even if French television remains a highly centralized institution, power over the characters – and their moral definition --- is not a hierarchical power. This is true for a good reason: few will explicitly intervene concerning moral issues. No one wants to use the term "morality." The term is like a hot potato tossed from person to person, as if it were an insult. Even at the highest levels in TV, where decisions are made, it is rare that a moral position is voiced as such. This phenomenon is explained by a sort of normative evolutionism that identifies "morality" with reactionary positions and a refusal to speak of morality with modernity. Because of this, programming advisers translate their requirements into terms that reflect their own professional objectives.

The goal of the changes they propose is to attract audiences. "What one hears is: your characters aren't attractive enough: it's too segmented." The moral intent as such is de-legitimized. Professionals prefer to hide behind what they think the audience wants even if this is risky and uncertain, rather than to refer to arguments that stress their moral sense.

The following example illustrates the point. During a discussion concerning a script that portrayed a story of pedophilia, a woman spoke up to stress that these questions in the current French context were becoming an obsession: "It's crazy! That's all we ever talk about!" Everyone agreed. Another participant added: "Today, Nabokov couldn't write *Lolita*!" Again, everyone agreed. However, there was a bit more reticence (some participants no doubt wondered whether it would be a very good idea to show *Lolita* on television). "Yes," added a participant with conviction, "what is absurd in all of this is that we seem to forget that children are sexual beings!" All eyes turned to that person. Caught up in the logic of what he was saying, and without noticing the disapproval he was eliciting, he continued: "It's true, it's grotesque, we act as if we didn't know that children can experience desire, too!" The atmosphere became glacial. Uncomfortable. He stammered. Today we are far from the liberated outbursts of the 70s. At the other end of the table someone spoke up, saving the situation: "There are all the same a whole bunch of other problems in the world, we can certainly find other human dramas to tell in our stories." General agreement. Consensus is arrived at along with a general relief, because it is always difficult to put others on the spot publicly.

In the implementation of regulations there is a mixture of elements of strict positioning located on a certain level of generality which mark boundaries that must not be crossed, and points of detail that form the very germ of common interventions which seem more anecdotal than substantial. However, all these aspects at the time

of the meetings seem to be placed on the same level. Far from being established, the ranking of priorities appears to be relatively unfixed. It is less the strength of arguments that determines the success of a remark and its insertion in the final manuscript than the *moment* when it is made. Time pressures intensify negotiations throughout the decision-making process. Because of this, the order in which changes are proposed plays an important role in determining those that will be adopted: for those who wish to hang onto an aspect of the script that is likely to be contested, what is important is to gain time. One must fill the debates with minor subjects. One must count on the overloading of the decision-makers' schedules. The constraints of urgency and the lack of time have a considerable impact on the content of the works. The chronological logic weighs on the hierarchical logic and deforms it.

The Chain of Transmission: Explicit Regulation, Implicit Regulation

Once the changes have been negotiated, they are communicated to the scriptwriter, who often does not personally attend production meetings. Indeed, the dynamics of writing are always a bit fragile. When a writer is confronted with his censors, one runs the risk of sterilizing him. Which is of course unfortunate from a psychological point of view – it is always upsetting to be confronted by others with one's writing difficulties. But it is above all disastrous on an economic level: productions are carried out on very tight schedules. The slightest delay has a ripple effect on the entire production; not respecting the schedule has a major financial impact on the production. Thus it is above all for financial reasons that maintaining the creative potential of the writer is an absolute priority. A delay in filming upsets the entire process, but it also, which is even worse, risks losing the best actors, because the higher an actor is in the hierarchy of recognition, the more his schedule is filled. This is why go-betweens are used. They are responsible for communicating the suggested corrections to writers. But they do not just play the role of interpreter: they are expected to employ a certain diplomacy, which often consists of showing he is removed from the participant who is not present in the face-to-face interactions.

These mediators thus serve as relays. But other difficulties arise here, linked to the imprecision of vocabulary. Unlike literary criticism which developed by inventing a precise and refined vocabulary to describe characters and effects of style, notably moreover because criticism was in written form, discourse on televisual works has remained singularly poor. Most commentaries are delivered orally. The same terms are used constantly, with, moreover, largely unexpected moral connotations. Thus "nice" for example, is an extremely depreciative adjective. In contrast, "cruel" is rather a compliment ("There's so much cruelty ... I love it!")

Many sentences are incomplete, the terminology used is vague. One notes a pronounced taste for oxymorons that enable one to be extremely positive, while preserving the possibility of multiple interpretations. The term "complicity" is particularly valued, perhaps because it is structurally ambiguous. The adverb of intensity, "too much," without any adjective, either signifies satisfaction: "He is too much!" or difficulty in pinpointing one's own thoughts: "He is too..." So it is forced to show both praise and reservations. A difficult task for an adverb. A single adjective can serve to describe highly different characteristics. For example, during a conversation concerning the same work, the adjective "ludic" can be used in four or five different ways. It is a quality of the original text, a trait that a character should have, the description of the state of mind that reigned at the time of filming, an actor's craft, or the ultimate appreciation shown toward the final work.

A proposition might lead to an immediate agreement, but it is sometimes more difficult to uncover the hidden meanings in it, at the moment when it is time to communicate to the absent writer the reactions his text elicited. Even if notes were taken scrupulously, remarks made in a notebook, sketchy and vague, remain impenetrable. Generally, many questions are resolved intuitively, through an appeal to complicity and to sensitivity whose effectiveness should not be underestimated (“It is... well... Ok,.. you see what I mean...”). One must note, moreover, that those involved often understand each other. What catches the one whose profession consists of gathering phrases and hoping to make sense out of them off guard, is nevertheless part of indisputable tacit knowledge. In fact, what counts for the writer is locating a difficulty more than the procedures proposed to fix it, because the solution is not often found in the text: (“It’s up to us to defend the piece. We have to explain, argue, say why. If someone says ‘this sequence has to be cut’ and we think it is really important, either we give in, or we re-think. In general it is a sign that there is something in the script that isn’t working.”) There is another solution to compensate for the difficulties of describing in words what will become images: it is a shortcut through a reference. Thus, during meetings there develops a specific competence linked to the knowledge of the cultural universe of those in charge: a certain scene in a certain film; a certain expression of a certain actor in a certain series; a certain type of kinship relationship. Immediately, the character invoked surfaces in the minds of those present, wearing his story and accompanied by his expressions, which enables an economical description. One must, moreover, note that illustrative examples are drawn from film or from American TV series more often than from French televised fiction. In any event, sharing common cultural references is a strategic element in the formation of consensuses.

Discussions over contents are often sociological hypotheses about the functioning of the social world, during which participants test contrasting perceptions of social reality through the way they envision the sequence of plausible events. However, even if these debates involve different anthropological conceptions, it is not on this plane that confrontations occur. There is no well-ordered exchange of clearly ranked arguments. The participants have a line of defense reinforced by their professional expertise. For writers, for example, it is a matter above all of defending the coherence of their entire project against isolated interventions that would change its nature: they protect themselves against the loss of emotional density: (“You’re going to strip my film!”) But above all their obsession is with a loss of coherence: “A script is machinery, it’s clockwork. You can’t move one thing without taking the risk of upsetting everything.”

Observing meetings in progress shows that one is not dealing with a structured debate, with argumentation that would enable the participants to refer to a well-ordered hierarchy of acceptable arguments. The exchanges are hybrids. They don’t speak first about issues of narrative logic, of the coherence of characters, of the originality of scenes before evoking higher arguments about the moral position of the work. Arguments blend together endlessly, passing from one register to another. An objection is raised on one level, it is answered on another. Thus when a reader is alarmed over an anticipated unfolding, (“We can’t let that get through”), the scriptwriter answers, while stressing the loss of emotional density that would accompany the change: “If Thomas splits with Sylviane, I’ll lose the best scenes in the film!” Since the tension between the logic of creation and the logic of regulation are insolvable, they are often resolved through a juxtaposition of arguments. There is always someone to recall responsibilities: “We mustn’t forget that we’re creating fiction,” and to recall professional demands: “We still have to have stories to tell!”

So the debates are not consensual. The final work that appears to viewers as a seamless whole with its calm and smooth characters, who, for that reason, spark criticism of the work, is at the time of production often a succession of violent trials: "A script is like the front lines; there are places where one gives in, places where one resists," which sometimes goes as far as indignant confrontation: "But have you noticed that there you are stomping on my moral rights!" But here, too, certain parameters temper the violence of reactions. A writer's re-employability depends on his reputation. Since the analytical resources available in this professional milieu to qualify, describe, and resolve a crisis situation are essentially psychological, the threat to a writer consists of being labeled with the negative description that arises most often in the notes I took: "He has an ego problem." Indeed, for a writer everything is a question of balance: he has to be "himself" "without having an "ego" (the use of Latin is always a bad sign). The only strategy possible for the one who risks being described as such consists of making it known that it is not his personal identity he is defending, but indeed that of his character. This is very difficult. To succeed he must find the right tone, that is, not appear too involved: it is by showing his detachment with regard to his characters that a writer gives the best guarantees of his professionalism. In the case of literary adaptations, the problem is further complicated because all those involved have personal knowledge of the work and the protagonists, and engage in discussions with series of associated memories (the time when they read the work, vacation, adolescent dreams...). Then it's a contest of images and misunderstandings.

Let's focus for a moment on the costumes of *Milady*. *Milady* is an adaptation of the *Three Musketeers*, directed by Josée Dayan, with Arielle Dombasles. This film was not very well liked, either by the scriptwriters (the most famous among them preferred to have his name removed from the credits), nor by the station which kept it for a long time before deciding to show it, nor by the critics who were reticent, nor by the audience which didn't tune in. (It fell below the general average for the time slot). By contrast, the film was very much appreciated by the creator of costumes:

I was lucky that the costumes of *Milady* were done by the Caraco studio which is a high fashion studio. They make dresses for Lacroix, for the fashion shows. If you see the costumes in person, they're made in such a way... they're made of leather, but real high quality leather! the finishing touches are incredible, bordered with little pearls, there is patchwork, all done by hand ... such precision... They're better than costumes made for film or theater.

Great care had been taken with the clothing. More than 700 costumes had been used, rented in France and throughout Europe. The heroine's had even been made to order. The objective was to find the best possible combination of material and color to express the perversity of *Milady*. These were the moral demands of the costumer, demands that involved a choice of material:

In the beginning, when they told me about the *Milady* project, I thought a little bit about the character. In fact, *Milady* is an Amazon... She's a woman who behaves like a man. And that's what I was looking for in the costumes. Even though they were period costumes, it was important that a certain aggressiveness be felt. So I decided to make Arielle's costumes in the period, but all in leather. There is suede, gilded leather, leopard, Cordoba leather. And it's a great perverse role. And afterwards, when Josée Dayan told me about the rest of the cast (Florent Pagny, Asia Argento, the Depardieus...) people you wouldn't think of ... I told the director, 'the cast

seems like rock and rollers; we should make a rock and roll version of Milady.' the three musketeers are in leather, sort of like black bomber jackets. They were members of the king's guard, but at the same time they were half-mercenaries. They had to be sexy, that's what was important. It's a very sexy story, that's why they're all in leather.

Thus it is through the choice of material even more than that of the color that the perversity is portrayed. Of course associations with leather invoke an entire universe of S&M reference, but at the same time, that is not what is most noticeable, because the television screen sacrifices the material to the colors, as it sacrifices touch, odor, taste to sound and sight. This point raises an issue that one finds more generally, characteristic of the distribution of tasks: often, the care given to a detail, perceived above all, indeed sometimes only by the professional himself, from what is most specific and detailed in his expertise, contributes much to his satisfaction with his work. Thus it is through the little things that are not always very noticeable and rather distanced from the final impression produced by the work as a whole to the viewers who are uninitiated, that a professional attributes moral value to his work.

Similarly, the assessment of his partners, directors or actors, rests on their ability to put themselves in the service of these specific demands, perceived from that point of view:

That's what's great about Arielle: you can put anything on her, and you don't have the impression she's wearing a costume. She's a true professional. Imagine, acting in the middle of the summer! She's amazing, she never complains. She's ready for anything. Very few actresses would have agreed to film in a bustier in the middle of summer with Josée Dayan's schedule! 4 scenes in one day, bam, costume change! And always in a good mood, laughing, singing...

What defines an ideal collaboration is when each person allows the other to go as far as possible in the demonstration of his professional abilities. In this case, an example is the disappointment, indeed the anger of Arielle when she found out she couldn't keep the wonderful dresses made just for her, which is wonderful praise for the costumer! The ultimate moral considerations, that moral and ideological order denounced by critics, are thus overshadowed by professional priorities that themselves engender their own criteria of morality. Thus, a production that skimps on the dry-cleaning budgets commits a true moral sin, from the point of view of the costumers.

Each group of professionals operates what one might call "a filtering reception." The original work is metamorphosed. Each person reconfigures it in function of the priorities assigned by his profession. It is thus chopped up into heterogeneous logics and becomes a sort of monster, through the hypertrophy of the characteristics relevant for the professional who is working on it. This is, moreover, what makes observing filming so interesting: it is an experience of perceptive enrichment. Each profession deforms and enriches the work from its own point of view: it is converted into a cluster of luminous rays with a range of projectors to regulate for the photo-director; a group of sounds to save and noises to eliminate for the sound engineer. For the make-up artist there is a back-and-forth between powdered skin and shiny skin, lips to outline, mascara that mustn't run: a set becomes an ocean of pores and eyelids to watch. For the costume artist, there is a wardrobe of clothes to maintain: wrinkles that call for ironing, tears that call for pins and needles. Since there is only one way for a costume to be clean and neat, and a thousand different ways for it to be rumpled, the movement of the plot poses problems for the costumers. They must

be sure that the clothes are capable of going back in time. It is thus necessary for rigs to be in sync with a filming schedule that is more concerned with the schedules of the actors than with the condition of their clothes. For the production manager, the work is translated by a schedule with felt-tipped pens, a list of hotels selected according to the prestige of an actor: a promising early career can merit a hotel with as many stars as one chosen for an actor at the end of a recognized career. These choices are public manifestations of a certain degree of recognition of professional merit, and the slightest blunder in the combination of these parameters can seriously degrade the atmosphere of a week of filming.

All these elements, from the most humble to the most serious, intervene in the film's contribution to the display of a moral horizon. At each of these stages a division of normative labor is manifest which is divided among the different people involved and, as the study shows, at each stage is incorporated into a professional logic that is always considered to be of the highest importance.

The priorities defined by the professionals are always linked to a certain idea they have of the way to "do their work well," which brings a barrage of intermediary moral judgments that are interposed between the higher objective of decency and morality that the story should fill from the point of view of the institution that feels responsible for it, and the assessments that the professionals make of it, in function of their own concerns. A certain number of tensions arise out of the contradictions that can exist between professions when the search for optimal quality for one of them interferes with the imperatives of coordinating the whole.

At each of these stages a specific type of complication appears, like so many micro-upsets whose more or less positive solution is instructive. Thus one sees a normative division of labor that is distributed among the different people involved and, as the study shows, at each stage is incorporated into a professional logic that is always considered a priority. The ultimate moral considerations are thus overshadowed by professional priorities which themselves engender their own criteria of morality. To concretely analyze how a consensus on questions of morality is come to presupposes not seeking to extract a core of pure values, but considering how the transforming alchemy that redesigns the work in function of the priorities of each person involved is carried out. Not all have identical importance. It is the result of these multiple interventions that gives the different characters their definitive coloration. Understanding how the personality of a character is defined thus amounts to being attentive to a group of mediations, each of which has its importance and which are equal to each other and which must each be observed to understand their respective weight in the realization of the final product.

For An Ethnographic Approach to Moral Consensuses

Thus, by separating the moral question from the philosophical horizon to which it is usually connected and by choosing to make it an object of empirical investigation, one notes that the issues are raised rather differently than if one were content to undertake a sociology of values or of representations. The moral landscape within which the characters are located appears to be neither stable, nor autonomous, nor transparent, nor consensual. It is caught up in material logics, constrained by temporal dynamics, dependent on the coordination of the various professionals at work. It is fraught with tensions between professional logics, creative aspirations, and logics of regulation.

Contents are not independent of the constraints that presided over their construction. A connection exists between the moral expectations of the characters and the optimal conditions of realization of the hopes of the professionals at work, to their most extreme ideological components. Thus it is not impossible that the success of certain moral forms imposed on television screens is connected to the fact that those forms have successfully and rather harmoniously combined strictly professional demands and the more vague expectations of cultural modernity – unlike other forms that disappear precisely because they do not achieve this alchemy. Thus, for example, the sexualization of the characters, that is, the central importance granted to the composition of their personalities by their sexuality, stands out in the storylines not only because, as a scriptwriter pointed out: “Freud covered that, it’s cheap psychoanalysis,” but because this transformation enables the profound renovation of the treatment of stories: this option did not exist, or not in this way, when the texts were written. It thus satisfies the imperative of creativity and of renewal. At the same time, sexualization gives the subject it is structuring an internal coherence that is in agreement with the logic of the story: it structures the text, giving it a backbone, since a motivation leading to action is clearly favored over all others. In addition, this modality of the construction of the subject around its sexuality is full of suspense, since the unconscious turns interiority into an enigma. Finally, it legitimizes a representation of images of sexuality that are likely to arouse in the viewer a mimetic desire that has the advantage of gluing him to the screen. It thus brings together the imperatives of creativity, innovation, modernity, coherence, economy, and of the audience.

Similarly, involving women in duels, giving a sword to *Julie, Chevalier de Maupin*, or a foil to Aurore de Nevers, allows the restoration of the thematics of the novel of cape and sword and does justice to the ambitions of female emancipation, while gleaning in passing a few nice scenes (swaying hips, flowing hair, revealing ribs and tears). As for the emergence of homosexuality in films, it is requested by producers not only out of a desire not to appear discriminatory, but also because this enables the recycling of an already available reservoir of outdated romantic scenes: one needs change the gender of one (only one) of the characters to make thousands of love stories come straight into cultural modernity, which undeniably facilitates the imaginative work of the scriptwriters. Thus these are the “constraints in a fishbowl,” the little small-scale arrangements that can be determining for the conditions that produce moral contents...

An interesting sociological issue arises at this point: there is a confusion between criteria of moral judgement and criteria of judgement of professional ability. How to define the phenomenon at the heart of this problem? The confusion of the criteria of judgement is a consequence of the fact that part of the descriptive vocabulary used in the ordinary evaluation of the veracity and credibility of the character (such as a filming team managed to compose and to incarnate them), is *the same* as that which is used in the ordinary evaluation of the representation of the moral sense that a character (such as the scenario builds it) should represent. In other words, a confusion is caused by the fact that there are no specific languages of description to express the evaluations of the first or the second type. In the absence of such specific languages, the terms of ordinary moral judgements are also those of the judgement of professional ability. The question the investigation seeks to begin to answer is thus: to what point does this terminological identity generate a confusion in the use of criteria of moral judgement which, without being deliberately sought, appears in the course of the production of the work of fiction at each stage of its making, in different ways for each trade involved in the process?

One can give a few illustrations of this phenomenon. A person who says to an actor during filming: "He is good, he is excellent!" does not evaluate moral aspects of the character. He speaks neither about his kindness, nor about his generosity, nor about his loyalty. He refers to the way in which he fulfils his role (which can be that of a true villain). His evaluation rests on strictly professional criteria and refers to the credibility of the scene which is being played, compared to what the scene is supposed to convey. "Pretty!" says another, while seeing a well directed blow of fist which reaches the face of one adversary. However, he does not really refer to aesthetic criteria. It also happens that the same commentators express their feelings with respect to the behaviour of the character ("an old marvellous lady! A very nice kid").

They refer then to criteria of general ethics. They can also call the actor everything under the sun because he drank too much the day before, because he has rings under his eyes or because he does not know his text. Or finally because it is well known that he behaves badly according to professional criteria which are also moral criteria, i.e. because he "takes all the credit". Commentators may also be pleased by the way the make-up girl succeeded in hiding the physical effects of the actor's behaviour of the day before ("Fortunately she is here with us! She is really good!"). All this is important, but not in the same way and not for the same reasons. However, if one wants to have a fine-grained understanding of the way contents of TV production are defined, and especially the way they evolve, such data are useful to start with.

Expressed moral judgements are available for the investigator in a compacted form. They resort indeed to the same vocabulary, and attribute to each of their elements several heterogeneous meanings. However, it is not a question of a banal polysemia. As in fact the same terms are used to make judgments of a rather different nature, such judgements end up replacing one another, contaminating the criteria themselves in a discrete and almost invisible way. Various criteria are expressed in a hidden way behind identical formulations. For this reason, it is necessary to collect the judgements as they are produced, without selecting them, treating them on a hierarchical basis, or purifying them *a priori*. One needs to grasp all of them, how heterogeneous they are, and follow their evolution. The imaginary characters are created starting from a professional ethics. This professional ethics uses a register homonymous to the registers of general ethics. It provides references and models which, while being structured by particular professional requirements, have a lever effect on the ordinary moral categories.

This article thus promotes the project of a realistic approach to the constitution of the moral panorama in which characters evolve, and, rejecting the idea of the pure autonomy of ideological contents, suggests carrying out a study on the way normative demands and professional ethics are, in practice, combined. To do this, it suggests granting a very particular importance to the moment when a sociology of characters and a sociology of professionals *are attached together*, to grasp the way professional priorities weigh on the production choices to influence them. There is a partly programmatic dimension, for the methodological principle it leads to (to grasp the moral universe of the characters from the moral categories of the professionals) was not set forth at the beginning of this study, but forms its principal result. This result enables us to identify the place we must focus on. It enables us to choose the type of interactions to be observed. It reveals a wealth of details, following specific describable and identifiable logics which have a decisive role in the way normative arrangements are established. This simple phenomenon of *the refocusing of*

sociological attention enables one to escape the determinism of ideological lines and to reveal the moments when alternatives open up.

Proceeding in this way detaches the moral question from the philosophical horizon with which it is associated in order to make it an object of empirical study. If one adopts this perspective, unexpected findings immediately multiply. The way the question is usually raised appears to be quite far from what observation reveals. The moral landscape in which the characters are located appears to be neither stable, nor autonomous, nor transparent, nor consensual. It is caught up in material logics, constrained by temporal dynamics, dependent on professional coordination. It is traversed by tensions between professional logics, creative aspirations, and logics of regulation.

The ethnographic study enables us to eliminate three illusions: that of a world of manipulation, in which what is at stake would be clearly perceived and the processes cynically mastered by hardened professionals. It also distances us from a representation of a coherent, logical, abstract, and well regulated space of discussion led within an ideal public space within which would take place a debate on values that are worth defending in the name of a certain idea of what the televisual institution should be and of the responsibilities that fall to it. Finally, it rejects the idea of an underlying structure that exists before the actors and dictates their unconscious choices to them. The frameworks of the agreements are not imposed as cultural codes that would *a priori* establish a consensus on forms of morality: they are put to the test of the coordinates of the context, give rise to debates through the tests in which are simultaneously tested the coherency and the legitimacy of the whole.

Fictional characters are not industrial products like any others. They are beings endowed with a moral sense, who have a sense of good and evil, of right and wrong, expectations of respect and recognition and certain aspirations concerning a fully accomplished life. They convey all these ideas into the public arena. They encounter publics there. They thus participate in the construction of a common world.

Understanding a production and the logics it implies does not prejudice the way it will be received, but it clarifies the conditions for its reception. What is at stake is essential because it is these fictional beings, so closely reined, so closely attached, well mastered, well attached to the needs of those who created them, who will then be let out into the world and will accompany people in their daily lives, with the characteristics that have been given to them. They will then make their contribution to the formation of a general moral sense. Characters let out into the world. Gone with the wind.

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