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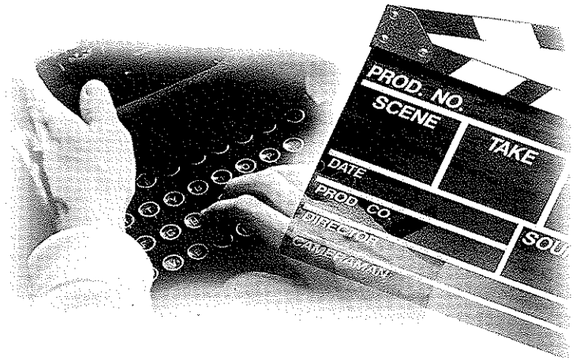

A Companion to Literature and Film

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1 Jaap Lintvelt, *Essai de typologie narrative: le "point de vue"* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1981), p. 79.
2 Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), pp. 206, 208, 209.
3 Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1965), vol. 2, p. 61.
4 Mieke Bal, "Narration and Focalization," *Poétique* 29 (1977), 121.
5 C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *Lénonciation* (Paris: Armand Colin), p. 49.
6 Ibid., p. 106.

Chapter 6

Adaptation and Mis-adaptations

Film, Literature, and Social Discourses

Francesco Casetti

Film and Literature: From Modes of Expression to Spheres of Discourse

The relationship between literature and film has been the subject of numerous reflections and analyses. Despite their diversity, most of these researches have a common starting-point. Both literature and cinema have been regarded essentially as *modes of expression*, sites and ways of manifestation of an ability to give shape to ideas, feelings, and personal orientations; in other words, as sites in which an individual's perceptions are combined with the person's will/necessity to offer an image of him or herself and of his or her own world. As a consequence, many of these contributions employ, as their key concepts, notions such as "work," "author," "poetics," and "intention." These notions focus on the presence of an individual's work and, simultaneously, on the fact that a text testifies to it; they emphasize the unfolding of personal actions and a personal universe, and the additional idea of being the repository of the text's deepest identity.

Among the reasons that have permitted this approach to become dominant, one in particular stands out: the desire to "valorize" cinema as an art form and as an object of inquiry; that is, the recognition of its "artistic value," a privilege that other fields, and in particular literature, have had for a long time. This desire, which is apparent in critical writings from the 1920s to the 1980s, has led to the application of categories used in literary studies – such as author, work, poetics, and so on – and in aesthetic theory to the cinema. Such an approach has contributed to the partial disregard of some of cinema's specificities; for instance, the fact that it is a mass-communication medium. Conversely, film studies have failed to extend the application of some peculiarly cinematic

categories to other fields in order to provoke them into questioning their own aesthetic assumptions.[1] Had that been done, the state of crisis in those categories would have become apparent; that is, the fact that they are no longer capable of sanctioning a medium's "artistic value." Benjamin had seen it coming: for him, the advent of photography and cinema was going to change the parameters of art, to the point that, retroactively, we appreciate how inappropriate it is to employ categories for film that should be undergoing re-formulation even in other fields. Rather, it is necessary to move in the opposite direction: cinema and photography should be used as new frames of reference for the critical assessment of other fields.[2] The Benjaminian path, however, has rarely been followed.

In keeping with this approach, I would like to suggest another perspective: both film and literature can also be considered as *sites of production and the circulation of discourses*; that is, as symbolic constructions that refer to a cluster of meanings that a society considers possible (thinkable) and feasible (legitimate). Consequently, film and literature are more revealing of the ways in which subjects interact with each other as either addressers or addressees, than of an author's ability to express him or herself. I therefore suggest regarding audiovisual and literary texts as one would regard conversations, newspaper reports, public speeches, research reports, stories and anecdotes; that is, as discursive formations which testify to the way in which society organizes its meanings and shapes its system of relations; or else, as events, as Foucault defines them,[3] which punctuate social life, functioning, on the one hand, as reservoirs of meaning, and, on the other, as vectors of relations. This perspective, which does not exclude a more aesthetically concerned approach, leads to a reformulation of the conceptual framework usually activated in understanding the relationship between film and literature, and to a reconsideration of the notion of *adaptation*.

Adaptation as the "Reappearance" of Discourse

Within this perspective adaptation is no longer seen as a work repeating another work, nor as an expressive intention that juxtaposes itself to another expressive intention. We are no longer confronted with a re-reading or a re-writing: rather, what we are dealing with is the *reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere*.

A reappearance is a new discursive event that locates itself in a certain time and space in society, one that, at the same time, carries within itself the memory of an earlier discursive event. Within 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. Otherwise said, 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.

An initial consequence is the fact that the analysis of adaptations should do more than compare the former with the latter text. It should instead focus on what changes in the passage from one to the other; that is, the frame within which they are located. Therefore, analyses devoted merely to formal aspects should not be trusted. Too often the analysis of adaptation is reduced to pointing out the narrative structure of the two texts in order to establish what changes have been made from one to the other, when in fact we understand that the passage from the source text to its adaptation is not simply a formal variation. There is something else going on, something deeper: the fact that the source text and its derivative occupy two entirely different places in the world scene and in history. Therefore, when we talk about adaptations, transformations, remakes, and so on, we should not simply focus on the structure of those texts – their form and content – but on the dialogue between the text and its context. Evidently, adaptation is primarily a phenomenon of *recontextualization of the text*, or, even better, of *reformulation of its communicative situation*.

Discussions about displacement are appropriate here:[4] in an adaptation we always need to identify the background of a story – for instance, in Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) the story of Romeo and Juliet is moved from Verona to Los Angeles – and, especially, we need to redefine the background within which the text locates itself – from Elizabethan theater to youth culture, its cult movies, and MTV. A displacement has taken place, specifically from one space–time to another, from one geographical location to another. As I suggested earlier, the passage from text 1 to text 2 involves – always and most importantly – a transition from a "situation 1" to a "situation 2." Therefore, consideration needs to be given not only to the text as such, but also to its conditions and modes of existence.

The Communicative Situation

The notion of the *communicative situation* is rather complex. Let us consider a conference panel: there are words bouncing from the table to the room; subjects, some of whom talk while others listen, ready to take the floor when the others have stopped talking; actions connected to the circulation of texts, such as the act of speaking, or gestures that accompany it in order to emphasize important sentences or even less serious ones; circumstantial actions, such as doodles drawn in the margin of one's notebook, or the winks of people that already know each other; circumstances, that is, the time and place of this communication; an organization that is responsible for the event, whether it is a university or a researcher's association; established rules that govern the conference; and again, in Schütz's words, a "life world," the existential framework within which we are located; and, finally, a "paper world," the universe of texts and discourses that circulate around us and give weight to what we say. A communicative situation is the result of the interrelationship among all these factors; it cannot be reduced to the sum of a text and a context. Rather, it is the complex, and often contradictory, interplay of all these elements.[5]

Simplifying, the communicative situation involves the presence of a text, a series of elements that guarantee the communicative interaction (interactional frame), a set of institutionalized rules and manners (institutional frame), a series of background discourses (intertextual frame), and a set of personal and collective experiences that operate as a reference (existential frame). These factors work together and determine each other. Each one of us has experienced communicative situations in which the existential frame exerted influence, for whatever reason. I read Flaubert's *The Sentimental Education* when I was sixteen, or so. Naturally, I did not consider the writing style as I was reading it. Rather, at that time, I read it as a novel that explained to me how hard it was to become an adult and, in this case, the real world "won." However, in my French Literature class the paper world, the intertextual frame, would be the winner: there, one is required to explain the author's stylistic choices and their relation to the choices of other authors of the same period. What this means is that in a communicative situation the elements that I listed above do not merely interact with each other, sometimes one of them overcomes the others and determines the whole. The role and the meaning of the text are consequently changed. If, for example, we want to proclaim our love to a woman with whom we are deeply in love, the style of the delivery does not concern us much; on the other hand, if we are poets, missing the rhyme is a great failure, regardless of the outcome of our declaration.

Calling attention to the communicative situation does not just imply considering a text and its surroundings, but, more importantly, it means dealing with the relationship between these elements and the way in which they, together, bend the text one way or another. What is at stake is the way in which a text appears as an event within the world. In some cases, texts appear to provide us with useful information for our life-world; at other times they entertain us (the institutional frame of cinema demands entertainment); other times they establish connections with previous discourses; finally, at other times, they simply ensure continuity within communicative interactions. The direction taken by the communicative situation therefore appears to be crucial.

The perspective I have just outlined carries precise consequences for the study of the recontextualization implied by adaptation. Let us consider the incredible number of adaptations in early cinema. Besides responding to the assumption that culture is an archive and that cinema works within it as the possibility to circulate its "symbolic capital," early cinema manifests the desire to challenge film's institutional frame: to present a story that has already been told, means to explore how cinema is capable of renewing and intensifying the relationship between text, representation, and spectatorship. The presence of a system of attractions, as emphasized by Tom Gunning, confirms that cinema relies on its ability to re-propose a new and more intense "spectacular experience."[6]

Let us then consider the famous adaptations of classical cinema, starting from Laurence Olivier's adaptations of Shakespeare. In these cases cinema is celebrated for its storytelling ability as much as theater, and with equal artistic value. Therefore, the intertextual frame is predominantly activated, and the adaptation rests on a situation that refers primarily to the "paper world." Finally, let us consider some contemporary

adaptations, such as Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995): if the question we pose is not so much what changes in thematic and formal terms between Jane Austen's novel and the film, but rather the change in terms of the communicative situations that the two texts construct and operate within, then the answer is that, while the novel appears to be referencing primarily a life-world, the film employs the same plot to explore the possibility of constructing a melodrama in the postmodern era. Ultimately, the film refers to the institutional and cultural framework within which cinema operates today. These examples, admittedly tentative, serve as indications of how to approach a new consideration of adaptation.[7]

Adaptation as "Re-programming" the Reception

To adapt, to move from one communicative situation to another, entails a number of things, most significantly, to re-program the reception of a story, a theme, or a character, and so on. The second life of a text coincides with a second life of reception. Let us go back to an example already mentioned: *Romeo and Juliet*. The link between Luhrmann's film and Shakespeare's tragedy is established by the reappearance of the same title and by the repetition of original lines. However, while the lines are the same, their reading changes. It changes first and foremost because Luhrmann's film presents an entirely different communicative situation, especially in the way in which it positions the spectator. In the move from play to film, what changes is the social function of the spectacle: while in the Shakespearean version an entire society recognized itself, in Luhrmann's film only the youth subculture can recognize itself. As a consequence, the reception of the film depends upon a sense of belonging and on exclusionary mechanics that have no relation to those activated by the shows at the Globe theater. Luhrmann then can claim faithfulness to Shakespeare, while in reality he re-programs the text's reception in a totally different way.

Ironically, society's self-recognition in the face of tragedy is nowadays activated by other films, which do not derive directly from Shakespeare. For instance, Abel Ferrara's *The Funeral* (1996) stages a somewhat Elizabethan story. More importantly, it forces all its spectators, without subcultural distinction, to question the meaning of life vis-à-vis the pervasiveness of evil. In this sense, I would go as far as to say that while Luhrmann's film keeps Shakespeare's lines unchanged, while shifting their meaning, Ferrara's film does not refer to Shakespeare yet, by reproposing a theme reminiscent of his work, and by activating a communicative situation in some ways similar to the one activated by Shakesperean tragedies, acts as a faithful adaptation in its own way (although not in an explicit, intentional way). In sum, *The Funeral* re-programs the "same" reception, while *Romeo and Juliet* programs a reception that is foreign to the original.

Along these lines we can naturally look for more complex examples. Consider Visconti's *La terra trema* (1948), an adaptation of Verga's novel *I malavoglia*, which originated in the desire to make a film about Sicily on behalf of the Italian Communist Party, in

preparation for the 1948 national election. Lino Micciché has successfully reconstructed, on the basis of unpublished documents, the long process of preparation for Visconti's film,[8] and has effectively shown what we could define as a double dislocation: from the militant project to Verga's novel – on which there had been heated debate in the pages of the film journal *Cinema*, and in which Visconti had to some extent participated; and from Verga's book to the film. On the basis of Micciché's findings, we could say that *La terra trema* is composed of two different texts that work in two different communicative situations. It is a commissioned film within a communicative situation in which the reference to the life-world has priority (to make a film that would show the class struggle in Sicily in support of the election) and in which the life-world itself was to be the element emphasized by the film. However, if we analyze the history of the critical reception of *La terra trema,* we see that from the very beginning the film becomes the manifesto of Neorealism: the attention is shifted from the horizon of reality (which fades away into a generic dimension) to the system of discourses that support the cinematic movement to which Visconti's film belongs. After all, even today this is the prevalent reading: the film is not regarded as a documentary on Aci Trezza or on the social and political condition of the Sicilian people (nor as an essay on social injustice or class struggle, although the opening epigraph encourages us to see it thus), but as the greatest, though problematic, example of a specific poetics. In other words, the guiding principle of the contemporary reading of the film's communicative situation is represented by the paper world more than by the life world. In this case, the relationship with Verga, which should be kept in the background in the case of the documentary reading of the film, comes instead into the foreground as an interesting element. We should remark that this re-programming of the reception is not the result of someone's intention (a change of mind by the Italian Communist Party or Visconti's will), but the outcome of a set of processes occurring around the film.

Postmodern Discourses

The perspective that I have been presenting raises issues ignored within the traditional debate on the relationship between cinema and literature; it makes it apparent, I hope, that the old issues need to be re-formulated.

Let us consider the idea of "faithfulness" and "unfaithfulness," or "closeness" and "distance," between the source and the derivative text. Within our perspective, it becomes clear that the main issue is no longer that of the permanence of a certain number of common elements, but rather that of re-proposing (or failing to do so) homologous or similar communicative situations. On this ground, if we ask: what of Shakespeare is present in Luhrmann? Then the answer is nothing, besides lines from *Romeo and Juliet*. We can also ask: what of Shakespeare is in Ferrara? And the answer will be everything (maybe via Artaud), except the lines. We can even wonder whether *The Jerry Springer Show* is the most Shakespearean of all, given that, in this day and age, it is the place where *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and family tragedies across generations are celebrated. The question remains open, but what is certain is that by changing our approach, the idea of closeness or distance between texts transforms radically.

Within this framework we also need to address another question: whether the discursive areas to which literature and cinema belong, and, more generally, the discursive space of postmodern culture have a role in the redefinition of such concepts as faithfulness or closeness. This is a substantial theme which I will only briefly explore.

One initial observation is that media present different "stages of maturity." Let us consider cinema: its regime of representation is changing as a consequence of the increasing use of digital images; the images on the screen that once stood for traces of reality are now images without a referent, mere graphic inventions, despite efforts to attain the highest degree of similarity with the world. Adaptation has to take this into account too: the "truth" of the sign matters (and this "truth" as a trace of reality is stronger in sound media, radio for example, or written media, such as books or Internet pages, than in visual media). At the same time, today's media tend toward convergence. If we consider cinema again, we can see how the advent of VHS, and then of cable television, led to a greater degree of proximity between cinema and television. The widespread use of digital signs will bring these two media even closer, and this will spread to other media. The technological base of different media will become increasingly homologous, thus fostering the process of contamination of genres and formats; we will witness an increasing hybridization of texts and the construction of increasingly universal formats, which can move without mediation (without adaptation) from one medium to another.

This osmosis between cinema, television, and other media also finds confirmation in the tendency toward uniformity in their use. Cinema-going is becoming closer to watching television (for example, it is losing its "festive" character and its ability to encourage processes of socialization), while television is "radiofied," insofar as "listening" is preferred to "viewing." These tendencies within the system of mass communication suggest an increasing synergy among media, and maybe a homologization of apparatuses, both in terms of the typology of products and in terms of reception. Within this framework, the short circuits that adaptations used to provoke between different discursive spaces appear quite insignificant vis-à-vis the interplay of references, and the nomadism of postmodern texts. For this reason, perhaps the most interesting instances are those in which adaptation functions as a site of resistance, as a block and filter; that is, when adaptation is in fact mis-adaptation.

Mis-adaptations and Resistance

If adaptation involves the reformulation of a communicative situation, we can foresee instances in which the adapted work does not really fit because it is too contrived, out

of place, or inadequate. Indeed, "second lives" are not always successful (and that is also true for the "first"). There are, however, some failures that are revealing in terms of the initial and final communicative situations. A first case of adaptation is very famous: *Les Parents terribles* (1948). Here, Cocteau adapts his own play by shooting it as if on stage. In this case the mis-adaptation is caused by the fact that the film does not distance itself enough from the source play: rather, it remains literally attached to it. However, as Bazin suggests in one of his best essays ("In Defence of Mixed Cinema"),[9] this fact is very revealing: by shooting a play in a claustrophobic way, as if on stage, without adding cinema's artistic specificity, Cocteau manages to highlight the essence of the cinematic gaze: its voyeurism, its ruthlessness, its key-hole aspect. Consequently, Cocteau's mis-adaptation tells us something that an adaptation could not say: it unveils the functioning of the filmic device, the institutional frame of cinematic reception. This is the way cinema works, and that is the way things are in a movie theater.

The second case is the opposite, and it is caused by an excess of distance, not of closeness. In it, the transformation has been too ambitious, and the journey from the source text to the derivative text too long, so that the connection between the two has been lost. It is a mis-adaptation that occurs because of a "too-much," not because of a "not-yet." I am referring to Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). We can legitimately ask what of Schnitzler's *Double Dream* is left in this film, and probably realize that there is nothing left but a hint of the narrative. However, it seems to a lot of people that Schnitzler can reappear within our discourses only in this way: in a masquerade, as if in a party where he does not belong, deprived of his knowledge and his control. (With Branagh's adaptations of Shakespeare, the case is very similar, although with opposite outcomes: a distance of mis-adaptation which is not revealing . . .)

New Perspectives

Without wanting to attribute to adaptation a value and a significance that it does not have, especially when compared to social phenomena of different weight – consider, for example, the processes of cultural hybridization of diasporic experiences – I still think that a more attentive, perhaps less orthodox analysis of this practice can offer precious insights into the social and cultural spheres. Naturally, to do so, we should go beyond the brief observations I have made so far. It is clear that this kind of orientation requires us to go beyond dry comparisons between film and literature in order to construct a corpus of discourses that comprise all kinds of social discourses, which in turn appear as unqualified and unqualifiable *écritures* revealing tendencies in taste, value orientation, and social obligation. This corpus must then be examined according to an explorative principle – whether thematic, stylistic, axiological, aesthetic, and so on – in search of a system of inner relations that does not necessarily privilege proximity over distance, nor coincidence over tensions; in fact, it is sometimes useful to read a discourse on the basis

of what it denies. Finally, from this system of inner relations, we need to extrapolate a plot which, while it might not be the most apparent, can be the one that would allow us to bring to the surface what is unsaid together with what is said, what is repressed together with what is apparent, and what is denied together with what is practiced. The goal is to give an account of a *network of discourses*, their connections and their intersections; and within this network, the coming together and the coming apart of some entities and configurations.

This is the bulk of the analyst's task, which is very far from the traditional, comparative approach based on an interplay of references, although not immediately apparent. Rather, it is closer to Foucault's project in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which he defines as "a *pure description of discursive events* as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it."[10] Foucault's perspective is crucial here both for its purpose and for the methodological issues it raises. Some of Foucault's goals – the will to "grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence," and, at the same time, to discover "relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind," in order to "constitute . . . discursive groups that are not arbitrary, and yet remain invisible,"[11] as well as some of the operational concepts and some of the analytical procedures that he proposes, such as the idea of discursive formations, or discursive practices, and the methodology of analysis of utterances or the retrieval of an episteme – can be very useful here as methodological guideposts. Besides, the perspective that I have been describing is less of a sociology of symbolic constructs than an "archeology of knowledge" as Foucault proposed it, and as it has developed in recent scholarship.

One more point needs to be added. If we consider cinema and literature as social discourses to be connected to a broader network of other discourses, we need a way to contain our analysis, or else we would undertake a never-ending project. Personally, I have been exploring the notion of negotiation, which is based on the assumption that every node in the network "confronts itself" with other nodes, while trying to maintain its peculiarity, on the one hand, and to connect with the rest of the network, on the other hand. As a consequence, each node either "connects" or "mis-connects" with the whole. This negotiation occurring at the intertextual level is then accompanied by a negotiation taking place at the level of reception (the text confronts its addressee, the latter's expectations, its readership, its previous knowledge, and the tension between the two poles creates an interpretation), a further negotiation on the institutional level (the text confronts the rules and principles of use in its own realm and at the same time it renews and explores their viability: often texts work this way), and a negotiation taking place on the broader social level (the text confronts itself with the life-world of a group and, in particular, with the social practices, the needs, and the processes of reception that characterize it; in this way the text presents itself as an individual and collective resource). In the case of cinema – that is, in the case of a medium that has had such a strong impact on the forms of discourse, reception, and social habits of the past century – to emphasize the processes of negotiation of some films permits us to focus on them

while considering the broader network to which they belong, which can then be used as a background or as a generic whole.

By way of conclusion, let me point out that I have been trying to show the possibility of changing the orientation of scholarship devoted to the relationship between cinema and literature. In particular, I have suggested that we should consider these two realms as sites of production and circulation of discourses and connect them to other social discourses in order to trace a network of texts, within which we can identify the accumulation or dispersion, the coming forth or the reformulation, the emergence and the disappearance of some themes and issues. This is not an easy task, even if it has an already established tradition in other disciplines. At any rate, this approach allows us to raise new questions, and to regard cinema and literature as two large "construction sites" where every society experiments with its values, meanings, and systems of relations – in other words, what it deems visible, thinkable, shareable. In these "construction sites" society challenges itself and to some extent the destiny of its members. In this sense, they are crucial to all of us.

Translated by Alessandra Raengo

Notes

1 The insistence on the nature of the cinematic medium has, of course, always been present: from Morin to MacLuhan, this tendency has grown stronger in recent years. However, this line of thinking has been largely absent in comparative studies, in the exploration of cinema's relationship with other "arts." For an attempt to resume this approach in a comparative context, see my "Il cinema come arte, il cinema come medium," in L. Quaresima (ed.), *Il cinema e le altre arti* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia/Marsilio, 1996).

2 In this respect Benjamin is bitterly ironic: "It is instructive to note how their desire to class the film among the 'arts' forces these theoreticians to read ritual elements into it – with a striking lack of discretion." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 227.

3 Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

4 See S. Bernardi (ed.), *Storie dislocate* (Pisa: ETS, 1999).

5 For a more detailed definition of the communicative situation, see my "Communicative Situation: The Cinema and the Television Situation," *Semiotica* 1: 2 (1996), 35–48.

6 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-garde," in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (eds), *Early Cinema: Space–Frame–Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), pp. 56–61.

7 The role of performance as agent of mediation between the paper world and the real world deserves mention and would require an investigation beyond the scope of this chapter. It is nevertheless important to point out that performance and performativity do contribute to the make-up of the communicative situation and alter the balance among its various structural elements.

8 Lino Micciché, *Visconti e il neorealismo: Ossessione, La terra trema, Bellissima* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990).

9 André Bazin, "In Defence of Mixed Cinema," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 53–75.

10 Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 27 (emphasis in the original).

11 Ibid., pp. 28 and 29.