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With Eyes Upside Down, Can We Still Read?

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“With Eyes Upside Down, Can We Still Read?”

I. Introduction

In his new book, *Eyes Upside Down* (2008), the dean of American avant-garde film studies, P. Adams Sitney, details the Emersonian tradition implicit in the major post-war experimental filmmakers—Marie Menken, Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, among them—to whom he has devoted his life’s work. Even though Sitney’s earlier masterpiece, *Visionary Film* (1974, 2002), clearly emerged from his literary training in Romanticism under Harold Bloom in the 1960s, the new book’s aggressive literary turn is remarkable. When I first looked at the table of contents for *Eyes Upside Down*, devoted to the same individual avant-garde filmmakers as *Visionary Film*, I assumed it was merely a re-packaging of Sitney’s basic mantra of radical individualism, that the 1960s avant-garde cinema represented the best of American filmmaking, so different from Hollywood because its filmmakers were devoted to using the camera in eclectic, highly personal ways. However, Sitney’s new book is so much more than that, connecting a wide array of twentieth-century experimentalism, from Brakhage in film and John Cage in music to their nineteenth-century Romantic literary counterparts, from the essays of Emerson and Thoreau to the anti-Transcendentalism of Herman Melville.

As an interdisciplinary scholar interested in as wide a relationship between film and literature as can be imagined, I believe the publication of Sitney’s new book could represent the beginning of a new sub-discipline in the field of adaptation studies, which we might call experimental adaptation studies. It is the project of this essay to sketch some possibilities for such a sub-discipline.¹

At first glance, such an endeavor seems like pure folly. As opposed to the commercial filmmaking in Hollywood, and other national cinemas as well for that matter (say, France in the 1930s), there is no commitment to either theatrical or literary source texts in the avant-garde tradition. Indeed, many experimental films are built upon a deliberately non-literary base, such as Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* (1924), a non-narrative visual exploration of the geometric shapes of modernity. It is as un-literary a mode of filmmaking as one can imagine.

And yet, the ground broken by *Eyes Upside Down* suggests that the literary culture undergirding the experimental film tradition in the United States is provocatively complex. Sitney gives us one possibility for thinking about literature and its relationship to avant-garde cinema, a cultural historical approach in which the literary soil of Emersonian Transcendentalism comes to fruition in post-World War II experimental filmmaking. However, Sitney is no adaptation studies scholar, and his approach is not interested in mining the intertextual relationships between the different artistic forms that are literature and cinema. If one seeks them out, it becomes clear that experimental cinema’s sources lie in literary culture more often than we might have thought.

In this essay, I will explore three possibilities for thinking differently about the relationship between literature and experimental cinema. First, I will examine

Robert Frank's 1961 experimental film version of Isaac Babel's short story, "The Sin of Jesus" (1921). What is the relationship between Babel's story and the film Robert Frank crafted from it forty years after its initial publication? What are the implications of Frank transforming the setting from Russia to rural New Jersey? This is an example of a film adaptation in the traditional sense.

Second, there is the case of an experimental film being referentially driven by an encounter with a canonical literary text. Such is the case with *Egg* (2005), an animated nine-minute short written and directed by Benh Zeitlin, an astonishingly astute adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). This is a referential intertextual case study. Third, I identify an intertextual relationship between a literary text and an experimental film that share the imaginative possibilities of a historical moment. To explicate this possibility, I pursue the intertextual relationship between *Reflections on Black* (1955), an early film by the most celebrated American experimental filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, and "The Enormous Radio" (1953), a frequently anthologized short story by an equally celebrated American writer, John Cheever. I propose that the intertextual methods of contemporary adaptation studies will provide a way to read Brakhage and Cheever in the 1950s as fellow travelers, interested in using their chosen media to interrogate the nature of conformity in the American city. This initial, eclectic foray into these three disparate experimental films will, I hope, inspire further work that seeks to define and explore the relationship between the experimental mode of filmmaking and the literary tradition more generally, far beyond the thesis of Romantic individualism forwarded by disciples of Harold Bloom.

II. Experimental Cinema as Adaptation: *The Sin of Jesus*

P. Adams Sitney ends *Visionary Film* with the assertion that American experimental cinema beyond the 1960s heyday of the underground era can best be understood as Menippean satire:

Within the historical morphology of the American avant-garde cinema the Menippean satire [...] gradually became the dominant new genre. A dialogue of forms and voices, open to narrative elaborations but not requiring them, in which characters embody ideas rather than manifest complex psychologies, the Menippea became the favorite genre of "postmodernists" internationally. (410-11)

Discussing the appearance of Stonehenge in Hollis Frampton's *Hapax Legomena: Ordinary Matter* (1972), Sitney interprets, "The moving camera uniting the architectural and natural sites, the fusion of personal, autobiographical (the Chinese syllabary [sic] obliquely refers to Frampton's emulation of his mentor, Ezra Pound), and world-historical allusions are typical of the American avant-garde cinema's appropriation of Menippean satire" (417). Studied variously by literary critics such as Northrop Frye, the Menippean satire is best known in contemporary critical circles as the locus of Mikhail Bakhtin's interest in the post-Renaissance novel, particularly François Rabelais's masterpiece, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1564). Bakhtin positions Menippean satire, not as a historical practice of antiquity, but as a modern mode of narrative in which a grotesquely comic

character ridicules (“carnivalizes”) the world of propriety. Thus, when one of the giants in the novel pees onto Paris, he floods the city, thus threatening the social power of the monarchy of France.

It is thus of considerable interest that the great find in the recent DVD release of the complete experimental films of photographer Robert Frank is his film adaptation of Isaac Babel’s 1921 short story, “The Sin of Jesus,” a Menippean satire about a grotesque pregnant servant girl who kills an angel by fucking him to death. Made in 1961, Frank’s film is unlike most of the experimental films of the period praised by Sitney. It is a narrative film, and if anything, reliant on the traditions of Italian Neo-realism more so than Brakhage’s Romantic lyricism. However, as Victor Peppard argues, Babel’s “The Sin of Jesus” is one of the great expressions of Russian Menippean satire, a tradition interrogated by Bakhtin in his masterwork, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Peppard claims:

Particularly germane to the stories of Babel [...] is the union of Menippean satire of “free fantasy” and symbolism, and sometimes a mystical-religious element, with extreme and vulgar gutter naturalism. It is also a genre of experiment, as it tends to employ unusual points of view, abnormal psychological conditions or states, eccentric behavior on the part of characters, scandals of all types, sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations, and misalliances of all kinds. (71)

That is to say, the significance of the collision between Robert Frank, one of the great photographers of the twentieth century, and Isaac Babel, one of our greatest short story writers, within the tradition of experimental narration, lies far beyond Harold Bloom.

“The Sin of Jesus” as Babel presents it is a stark short story of only six pages. Its first sentence is an indicator of the story’s minimalism: “Arina was a servant at the hotel” (245). This opening informs us of the identity of the central female character, a maid at the Hotel Madrid in Russia, with as few words as possible. Babel then shifts from narrative to morality: “She lived next to the main staircase, while Sergoya, the janitor’s helper, lived over the back stairs. Between them there was shame” (245). The blank narration lulls the reader into submission, only to then bludgeon her with the unexpected attribution of shame.

The Menippean satire begins with the profanation of Christianity: “On Palm Sunday Arina gave Sergoya a present—twins” (245). The plot begins when the uncaring Sergoya announces he is leaving for four years to fight in the Army. Arina responds with despair, lamenting her situation, particularly a culture that does not allow her to control her own sexuality:

For four years we’ll be parted, and in four years, whichever way you look at it, I’ll be sure to bring two or three more into this world. It’s like walking around with your skirt turned up, working at the hotel. Whoever stops here, he’s your master, let him be a Jew, let him be anybody at all. By the time you come home, my insides will be no good any more. I’ll be a used-up woman, no match for you. (245)

Arina continues by revealing her plan for self-preservation to Sergoya before he leaves: “I’ll spill my load in three months, then I’ll take the baby to the orphanage

and marry the old man" (245). Upon hearing this, Sergoya beats Arina; the narrator heightens the emotional impact of this abuse by remaining cold and distant, finding irony the best way of expressing his outrage: "When Sergoya heard this, he took off his belt and beat her like a hero, right on the belly. [...] There was no end to the beating, no end to the man's tears and the woman's blood, but that is neither here nor there" (246).

The horrific beating prompts Arina to turn to religion. Jesus responds to Arina's prayers and comes to console her. Christ proposes that he relieve Sergoya of his obligations to the Army. Arina comically profanes again, proposing that the Russian government is more powerful than Jesus: "Try and get away with it—not with the policeman around. He'll drag him off as sure as daylight" (246). Jesus next tries to change Arina's behavior, suggesting that she take up a life of sexual purity. Yet again, Arina shockingly stands up to Jesus, comically replying, "For four years? [...] To hear you talk, all people should deny their animal nature. That's just your old ways all over again. [...] No, you'd better give me some sensible advice" (246).

Surprisingly, Jesus responds tenderly to Arina's assaults—"The Lord's cheeks turned scarlet, the woman's words had touched a tender spot" (246)—so he sends one of his angels, Alfred, to console her for the four years while Sergoya is away. Alfred is a horny twenty-year old, but since he is an angel, he is incapable of inseminating Arina. Essentially condoning non-procreative sex, Jesus tells Arina: "And as for offspring, you've nothing to worry about—you can't bear a duckling from him, let alone a baby, for there's a lot of fun in him, but no seriousness" (247). Upon telling Arina that her only responsibility is to take off Alfred's wings every night before they go to bed, Jesus leaves. That night, Arina gets Alfred drunk on vodka and in her besotted lust, neglects to tend to Alfred's wings. In the story's most sacrilegious passage, Arina satiates herself, smothering Alfred under her pregnant body:

As soon as they fell asleep, she went and rolled over on top of Alfred with her hot, six-months-big belly. Not enough for her to sleep with an angel, not enough that nobody beside her spat at the wall, snored and snorted—that wasn't enough for the clumsy, ravening slut. No, she had to warm her belly too, her burning belly big with Sergoya's lust. And so she smothered him in her fuddled sleep, smothered him like a week-old babe in the midst of her rejoicing, crushed him under her bloated weight, and he gave up the ghost, and his wings, wrapped in her sheet, wept pale tears. (249)

For her sin, Arina is summoned before Jesus for judgment. Having been as patient up until now as, well, Jesus, the Savior finally spills his rage at Arina for murdering his Angel: "But here the gentle heart of Jesus could endure no more, and He cursed the woman in His anger" (249).

And yet, Arina stands up to Jesus again, invoking the Menippean sensibility of the Rabelaisian body: "Was it I who made my body heavy, was it I that brewed vodka on Earth, was it I that created a woman's soul, stupid and lonely?" (249). Jesus ceases his Christ-like attitude toward Arina, spitting back at her: "You've smothered my angel, you filthy scum" (249). The narrator then intervenes, telling

the tale of how all the men in the village lust after Arina: "Isai Abramych, the old codger, heard about this cute little belly, and he was right there too, wheezing toothlessly: 'I cannot wed you lawfully [...] However, I can lie with you the same as anyone'" (250). Babel's bitter narrator can stand the treatment of Arina no longer. He finally states his belief that, "The old man ought to be lying in cold mother earth instead of thinking of such things, but no, he too must take his turn at spitting into her soul" (250). The narrator declares curtly that this is the end of his tale.

And yet, Babel's story has a coda. Arina raises her belly for Jesus to view: "See, Lord, what a belly! They hammer at it like peas falling in a colander. And what sense there's in it I just can't see. But I've had enough" (250). Inverting the expected, Babel tells us, "The Savior fell on His knees before her" (250). As the story ends, Jesus asks Arina for forgiveness, a Bakhtinian reversal of the normal events. In a bleak indictment, Arina refuses to convey the message of Christianity: "There's no forgiveness for you, Jesus Christ. [...] No forgiveness, and never will be" (250).

The Menippean satire of Babel's "The Sin of Jesus" lies in its reversals of the expected logic of Christian narrative. Jesus should come help Arina to absolve her sins. Instead, Arina ends up indicting *Christ's* sins, hence the Menippea of the very title itself, "The Sin of Jesus." The short story offers a viciously grotesque presentation of ribald female sexuality and its moral consequences. Why Robert Frank would have chosen this story as the source for an American avant-garde film is not at all clear at first glance. However, I believe the connection has to do with Babel's understated portrait of Arina's suffering amidst her bleak surroundings.

Frank is, of course, famous for his photography book, *The Americans* (1958), a pictorial study of the nation that indicts patriotic rhetoric using graphic depictions of poverty and injustice. The most famous photograph from the book, "Trolley New Orleans," which serves as its cover, captures the suffering of people like Arina amidst a bleak human landscape.

Five compartments of a trolley car bisect the image, at the bottom of which is the iron siding of the conveyance. Distorted images of people in the street are reflected in the tram's metallic side on the top of the car. In between are five separate images of Americans. In the middle window, the exact center of the image, is a posed boy and his crying sister behind him. To the right, are black people at the back of the trolley car, almost certainly due to Jim Crow. In one of the most haunting portraits in the history of photography, an African-American man looks out of the car with a sense of longing that is highly reminiscent of Arina's in "The Sin of Jesus." At the front of the car is a somber white woman who looks at the camera with pure rage. In his astute analysis of the photograph in *Deliberate Speed*, W. T. Lhamon, Jr., highlights the cinematic nature of this composition: "Each window in 'Trolley—New Orleans' is a separate framing, on a string like a movie strip" (132).

Thus, when Frank abandoned photography after the publication of *The Americans*, and became an experimental filmmaker, we can at least understand the transition via the proto-cinematic nature of "Trolley—New Orleans." Frank's first

film, with Albert Leslie, was *Pull My Daisy* (1959), narrated by Jack Kerouac, and featuring most of the stars of the Beat literary movement, such as Allen Ginsberg. Two years later, without his Beatnik collaborators, Frank would follow *Pull My Daisy* with the adaptation of Babel's "The Sin of Jesus." The latter film strips the short story of its Russian setting. Instead, Arina (now named Anna) lives on a rural New Jersey farm.

Anna is first discovered by the camera sitting dejected by the side of her bed, on which sleeps Felix, the Sergoya character, and played by a shockingly young off-Broadway actor, Telly Savalas. Anna goes outside to tend to her chickens. Inside a barn, she loads eggs into a sorting machine. Like the iron conveyance of "Trolley—New Orleans," the machine is the central focus of Frank's film. The mechanical levers lift each individual egg, test its weight, and then sort the eggs into various metallic chutes. The machine is Frank's



visual metaphor for expressing Anna's suffering. It takes the fecund eggs and reduces them to quantitative bundles of weight. So, too, is Anna mechanically trapped. Her fertility, her pregnant belly, is trapped within the loveless, cold, and barren American farm.

In a prediction of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's feminist experimental film, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), which also features minimalist voice-over narration by a woman doing domestic chores, Anna narrates her boredom from off-screen: "Feeding, cleaning, clothing [...] Winter and summer, it doesn't matter. Same machine, same eggs. Day after day, winter, summer, winter." Anna sighs and continues with her monotonous work. Anna mindlessly writes on the "Beacon 12 Month Egg Record" sheet, but consoles herself, "Felix is with me now, that's good."

However, Frank matches Babel's ironic narration by immediately cutting to Felix's friend Al coming to retrieve him for service in the Army. Unlike Babel's Sergoya, who seems to relish telling Arina he is leaving, Felix is a coward. Al instead offers to tell her, which he does, only to warn Anna that he will be demanding sexual favors of her in Felix's absence. As Al and Felix drive away from the farmhouse, the film melodramatically frames Anna at a window, looking longingly after Felix. Having been told by Felix that, "I'm sick of you and I'm sick of this place," Anna goes outside to perform her chores. This time, she cuts the heads off of chickens. They squirm, dripping blood onto the ground on top of their own severed heads. Atonal, modernist music establishes her existence as living death.

Then, as if in *The Miracle* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948), Anna enters the barn and encounters Jesus. She tells the Savior: "I'm the girl who works on the farm. He

went away. I had his baby. I don't know what to do." Without any of the sacrilegious challenging of the Lord as happens in Babel's story, Jesus offers Anna the troubled angel Alfred, who is desperate to return to Earth. Chimes ring out in the barn. A high angle shot of Anna lying on the hay, dreaming of Alfred,



indicates that Anna has embraced her chance at happiness. After the wedding of Alfred and Anna, she exclaims exultantly in voice-over, "I have an angel." Alfred leans forward to kiss Anna. Anna and Alfred get drunk. She lays him back onto the bed to kiss him. The lights go down as she begins making love to him. The candles in the room flicker as she climaxes.

Later that night, Anna awakens to discover Alfred's ruined wings. Her bed empty again, she grabs at the feathers desperately. A thunderstorm rages as she walks outside in the fallow fields of the farm, stumbling across Jesus once again. Jesus is immediately angry because Anna has murdered his angel. "As it is in Earth, so too shall it be with you from now on," he decrees sternly. Ignoring Anna's pleas, Jesus walks away in disgust. Having been abandoned, Anna is raped in the barn by Al in a surrealistically ambiguous sequence. Anna desperately tries to give Al the eggs, but he throws them aside, breaking them.

Afterwards, Anna's voice screams out into the empty forest. Jesus approaches Anna in the barren field. He kneels before her now, asking her forgiveness: "Forgive your sinful God." Without uttering a word, Anna walks away from him, out of the frame. Jesus stands up in the empty field, in long shot, his head nodded down dejectedly. The film ends as bleakly as Babel's story, without redemption, without hope.

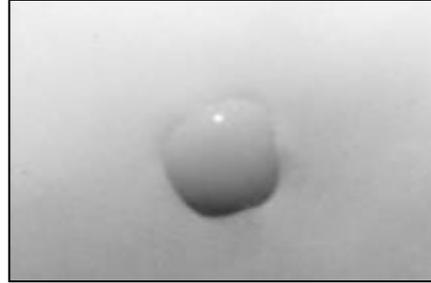
Thus, Frank's film version of *The Sin of Jesus* maintains the basic plot spine as well as Babel's thematic indictment of the redemption implicit in the story of Christianity. It is Jesus's sin, not Anna's, which is the film's concern. However, unlike Sitney's proclamation of the Mennipean satire of the American experimental cinema, Frank's film strips Babel of comic grotesquery. Gone is the repeated assault by Anna on Jesus, filled with the bitter irony of Babel's narration.

In the only piece of criticism about the film that I could find, Luc Sante argues: "The tone swings back and forth between despair and whiffs of mysticism that slide into a raggedy kind of farce—you never exactly know whether to laugh or not" (32). Instead, Frank uses stark black and white shooting to present a neo-realist depiction of Anna's sterile life on the farm. Sante posits, "The cinematography is in a bleak, rural mode, although it hardly qualifies as social realism; there are intimations here of Frank's later still photographs taken in Mabou, Nova Scotia" (32). Consistent with Frank's photography, the images, particularly of the egg machine, produce a symbolic indictment of Americans' despair fully in keeping with Babel's similar portrait of those suffering in Russia in the early 1920s.

III. Referential Intertextuality: *Moby-Dick's Egg*

Nothing could be further in approach to adaptation from Frank's direct reworking of Babel than Behn Zeitlin's nine-minute short, *Egg* (2004).² Frank's is a 37-minute narrative film that captures the plot and theme of Babel's short story, even if stripping away its Menippean elements. On the other hand, Zeitlin's film completely distorts the structure and theme of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, instead providing a thoroughly Menippean satire of Melville's anti-Transcendentalist project, grotesque and irreverent toward its purported source text.

The film begins with the sound of water flowing over an image of milky white fluid, into which rises a yellow egg yolk. The camera tracks past the yolk toward a ship. Tinny, melodramatic music sets the tone of the film as a silent era pirate movie. An intertitle announces, "Now ye may turn back ye wretched swine." The captain skewers a mate's head with his pirate sword.



A grotesque, excessively deformed Ahab, this captain does not seem to have any functioning human body parts left. He has hooks for hands, and his belly has a porthole through which we can see his intestinal organs. If this is *Egg's* Ahab, then a man in a sailor hat being made to walk the plank, whose given name in the film is

Pillsworth, is its Ishmael. Ahab asks Pillsworth, "And ye, do ye wish to turn back?" to which Pillsworth nods no. Ahab waves his hook toward the sky. The camera captures this action from a God's eye view, similar to the witnessing of Anna's miracle in the barn in *The Sin of Jesus*. Both Ahab and Anna boldly defy God.

An unexpected rumbling on the soundtrack precipitates a shock cut to a bowl of eggs on a conveyor belt on a sound stage. Three humans with grotesque make-up on their faces—in the film's end credits they are listed as the "bird children"—turn mechanically in unison to open their mouths, like baby birds about to be fed. They eat from the bowls that the conveyor belt moves in front of them, containing such items as popcorn, grass, and carrots. The bowl of eggs, in which sits purportedly the egg inside of which the drama of *Moby-Dick* is playing



out, sits far down on the conveyor belt. The camera swish pans back to the bowl of eggs.

Inside the egg, back on the Pequod, Ahab spies the yolk floating in the white albumen. "Thar she blows," an intertitle announces. The film cuts back and forth between Ahab's pursuit of his no longer white whale, the egg yolk, and the three animal-like humans consuming from the bowls. Finally, the bird child in the middle eats the egg, shell and all. Ahab's harpoon hits her uvula.

Inside her mouth, we see Ahab and Pillsworth fall behind her teeth, landing on her tongue. The yolk begins drifting back down her throat. She swallows. Ahab and Pillsworth are suspended in her esophagus, tethered to the rope harpooned into the woman's uvula. They stare into her stomach, on top of which sits, in a disgusting black broth of acid, the egg yolk, still intact (but definitely not in tact!). The eating human twitches in pain; she is now bleeding from her mouth as the film's pacing accelerates. Unlike Anna's egg machine, whose pace is slow and methodical, this conveyor belt animates life to the point of a consumptive frenzy. An intertitle reads, "Farewell me hardy, let no man say Ahab died in vain," the film's first actual reference to the captain as Ahab.

The rope around their waists begins to fray. The egg sinks into the stomach juices. "Ye damn-ed beast, from hell's heart I stabbeth thee," chants the falling Ahab, who lands inside the intact yolk, sitting atop a pile of human feces. While we ponder the pile of waste, the soundtrack rhythmically presents the other two bird children crunching celery. The middle woman is dead, her head laid back in rigor mortis. Unaffected, the other two continue chewing ravenously. Like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, Pillsworth is spared by *Egg*, still suspended in the esophagus, staring through the woman's anus at the yellow egg yolk. As the dead woman's anal sphincter closes shut, the film fades to black.

Whereas Frank's filmic presentation of *The Sin of Jesus* preserves the structure and theme of the Babel short story, *Egg* all but discards *Moby-Dick* altogether. While brilliantly inventive in terms of both its image and sound tracks, *Egg* is certainly not a conventional adaptation of *Moby-Dick*. However, its grappling with some of Melville's imagery is nonetheless intellectually productive. For one thing, *Egg* is the only filmic intertext of *Moby-Dick* (from John Barrymore's 1930 film, directed by Lloyd Bacon, to Nicholas Meyer's *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* [1982]) to replicate, and indeed extend, Melville's interest in consumption. *Moby-Dick* is overtly a nineteenth-century interrogation of American imperialism, framed through the mad consumption of whales as the fuel for endless oil lamps.

However, Melville extends the metaphor of consumption even more directly. Hell is, for Ishmael, "an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling." In Chapter 65, "The Whale as a Dish," Melville addresses the relationship between the consumption of food and whale oil most directly: "That mortal man should feed upon the creature that feeds his lamp, and, like Stubb, eat him by his own light, as you may say; this seems so outlandish a thing that one must needs go a little into the history and philosophy of it" (298). Constantly undermining the nineteenth-century racist belief in white civilization's superiority over people of color like Queequeg, Ishmael works himself into a righteous frenzy by the end of the chapter: "Go to the meat-market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of

live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? Who is not a cannibal?" (300). That is to say, *Egg's* grotesque and scatological revelry in images of consumption is not as far apart from Melville's project as the staid literary criticism of *Moby-Dick* would lead one to believe.

The fact that *Egg* is not just interested in any consumption, but of ova, is of particular significance for the story I am weaving about these different experimental films as adaptations. For Zeitlin's and Frank's films begin to converge in their presentation of egg machines as the mechanical subversion of basic humanity. Anna is trapped symbolically by her attachment to her farm's egg weighing machine. The central "bird child" in *Egg* is literally murdered by her consumption of one very bad egg, one that happens to house Captain Ahab and his harpoon.

However, the concept of Menippean satire connects *Egg* not to Frank's film, but to Babel's story. For, unlike Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Babel's "The Sin of Jesus" revels in comic grotesquery to produce its satirical vision. So, too, does *Egg*. The film points to the scatological reality of human beings, seen not from the outside in, but from the inside out. In his analysis of Babel's Menippean satire, Victor Peppard gives us language for understanding *Egg*, not as a vicious destruction of the greatness of *Moby-Dick*, but as a carnivalesque reconstruction of it: "Whereas characters are 'heroized' in epic literature, they are brought down to earth and made familiar by the 'carnival legends' of Menippean satire" (71). That is to say, *Egg* brings Captain Ahab and the surrounding characters down from Melville's mythical plane onto a bodily, human one: In *Egg*, Ahab's pursuit of his whale leads him to every human's end, in a pile of refuse, consumed by maggots, and returned to the Earth not as transcendent spirit, but as digested molecules.

IV. Imaginative Intertextuality: Cheever, Brakhage, and the Secrets of Domesticity

Thus far, I have explored two very different experimental films as adaptations. In *The Sin of Jesus*, Robert Frank reworks Isaac Babel's short story, preserving the basic plot structure and thematic indictment of Christianity. In *Egg*, Benh Zeitlin performs a referential intertextual reworking of *Moby-Dick*, but one that literally buries Melville in feces, risking obscuring the original altogether. *Egg* is a radical intertextual adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, one that requires plumbing the symbolic depths of Melville's text to unearth its metaphors of consumption.

My third case study, that of John Cheever's "The Enormous Radio" (1953) and Stan Brakhage's *Reflections on Black* (1955) is yet another sort of intertextual arrangement. The distance between Cheever's story and Brakhage's film is even more remote even than *Egg* is from Melville. My reading of *Reflections on Black*—as a similar interrogation of the horrors of intimate American domestic partnerships as that in "The Enormous Radio"—is what I have elsewhere termed an imaginative intertext (Metz 6), a work of criticism, not of textual production (the traditional basis of adaptation studies), which yolks two disparate texts together. In the middle of the 1950s, perhaps unaware of each other's work, Cheever and Brakhage represent the despair of isolated lives in New York City.

“The Enormous Radio” concerns Jim and Irene Westcott, an average middle-class American couple who live in an apartment building in New York City. Their radio stops working, so Jim buys Irene a new model. Much to their delight initially, the radio allows them to eavesdrop on the intimate lives of their neighbors in the building. By the end of the story, the invasive radio has become a cursed deliverer of suffering into their lives; threatening their marriage, the radio forces Jim and Irene to confront their own domestic dysfunction. Irene forces Jim to get rid of the radio before they are driven mad by the despair of others, and of their newly interrogated, deeply flawed selves.

Slightly more wordy than Babel, but not much, Cheever begins his story with prose that reduces Jim and Irene to actuarial status: “Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins” (33). Like Anna in front of the egg-machine on the New Jersey farm, Cheever’s husband and wife are defined as not only alienated from each other, but from modernity itself: “Neither of them understood the mechanics of radio—or of any of the other appliances that surrounded them—and when the instrument faltered, Jim would strike the side of the cabinet with his hand” (33).

Like the egg-weighing machine in Frank’s *The Sin of Jesus*, the radio in Cheever’s story is at first an aggressive, unwelcome violator of Irene’s domestic space: “She was struck at once with the physical ugliness of the large gumwood cabinet. Irene was proud of her living room, she had chosen its furnishings and colors as carefully as she chose her clothes, and now it seemed to her that the new radio stood among her intimate possessions like an aggressive intruder” (33-34). Cheever describes the radio as “malevolent,” at this early stage a remarkably melodramatic word for a household appliance, predicting the suffering to come.

At first, the domestic situations that the radio transmits from the other apartments are banal and inconsequential:

“Have you seen my garters?,” the man said again. “Just button me up and I’ll find your garters,” the woman said. Jim shifted to another station. “I wish you wouldn’t leave apple cores in the ashtrays,” a man said. “I hate the smell.” (36)

At first, Jim and Irene actually grow closer together as they laugh at their neighbor’s foibles: “The Westcotts overheard that evening a monologue on salmon fishing in Canada, a bridge game, running comments on home movies of what had apparently been a fortnight at Sea Island, and a bitter family quarrel about an overdraft at the bank. They turned off their radio at midnight and went to bed, weak with laughter” (37).

However, as the domestic situations on the radio begin to get more serious, the Westcotts begin to see their own dysfunction reflected in the stories coming from their neighbors’ apartments. Jim and Irene listen to a story about petty theft:

“I found a good-sized diamond on the bathroom floor this morning,” a woman said. “It must have fallen out of that bracelet Mrs. Dunston was wearing last night.” “We’ll sell it,” a man said. “Take it down to the jeweler on Madison Avenue and sell it. Mrs. Dunston won’t know the difference, and we could use a couple of hundred bucks....” (38)

Like some vicious parody of an *I Love Lucy* episode, these overheard conversations prompt Jim and Irene to fight over their own bills. Jim has a repairman come to fix the radio, but he gets mad at Irene that the repairs will cost \$400. He yells at Irene for lying to him about having paid the bills, literally the exact circumstance that fuels the first act of the "Job Switching" episode of *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 9 Sept. 1952) in which Ricky and Lucy switch jobs for one day, with comically disastrous results (Lucy destroys a candy factory conveyor belt, avenging Anna's despair at the egg-weighing machine, while Ricky destroys his apartment's kitchen).

However, the drama of "The Enormous Radio" ceases to be comical by Cheever's story's end. Jim and Irene's fight about the bills begins to expose Jim's angry resentment:

"I see that you haven't paid your clothing bills yet. I saw them on your dressing table." He looked directly at her. "Why did you tell me you'd paid them? Why did you lie to me?" "I just didn't want you to worry, Jim," she said. (40)

Jim can respond to Irene's act of kindness with nothing but despair: "I'm not getting any younger, you know. I'm thirty-seven. My hair will be gray next year. I haven't done as well as I'd hoped to do. And I don't suppose things will get any better. [...] I don't like to see all of my energies, all of my youth, wasted in fur coats and radios and slipcovers and—" (41).

Finally, the stories on the radio turn deathly serious. One night, immediately upon entering the apartment at the end of the day, Jim is greeted by Irene screaming at him: "'Go up to 16-C, Jim!,' she screamed. 'Don't take off your coat. Go up to 16-C. Mr. Osborn's beating his wife. They've been quarreling since four o'clock, and now he's hitting her. Go up there and stop him'" (39). The stakes of the drama become addictive for Irene, who begins listening to the radio alone, obsessively: "She told the maid that she was not to be disturbed; then she went into the living room, closed the doors, and switched on the radio" (38). Later that night, Irene desperately sneaks back to the appliance in the middle of the night: "She waited that night until Jim had fallen asleep, and then went into the living room and turned on the radio" (39).

The quarrelling of others begins to infect Jim and Irene's relationship directly:

"Don't, don't, don't, don't quarrel with me," she moaned, and laid her head on his shoulder. "All the others have been quarreling all day. Everybody's been quarreling. They're all worried about money. [...] And some woman in this building is having an affair with the handyman—with that hideous handyman. It's too disgusting." (39)

Irene tries to get Jim to convince her that they are different than what they are hearing on the radio: "Life is too terrible, too sordid and awful. But we've never been like that, have we, darling?" [...] "We're happy, aren't we, darling?" [...] "And we're not hypercritical or worried about money or dishonest, are we?" (40). However, Jim cannot offer this panacea to the disastrous mirror the radio has held up to their own lives. Responding badly to Irene's desperate attempts to

differentiate their relationship from the couples on the radio, Jim finally snaps and reveals his resentful opinion of his wife’s self-delusion:

Why are you so Christly all of a sudden? What’s turned you overnight into a convent girl? You stole your mother’s jewelry before they probated her will. You never gave your sister a cent of that money that was intended for her—not even when she needed it. You made Grace Howland’s life miserable, and where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist? I’ll never forget how cool you were. You packed your bag and went off to have that child murdered as if you were going to Nassau. If you’d had any reasons, if you’d had any good reasons [...]. (41)

At this point, the radio has destroyed the couple’s fantasy that they are different from any other couple suffering alone in despair in the apartment building. Cheever saves one last ironic stab, ending his passionate allegory of intense human despair with the banalities of regular radio reportage: “‘An early morning railroad disaster in Tokyo,’ the loudspeaker said, ‘killed twenty-nine people. A fire in a Catholic hospital near Buffalo for the care of blind children was extinguished early this morning by nuns. The temperature is forty-seven. The humidity is eighty-nine’” (41).

At first glance, Stan Brakhage’s *Reflections on Black* would seem to have nothing to do with the understated presentation of Cheever’s irony. Borrowing from the techniques of what Sitney calls the trance film, *Reflections on Black* begins with a somnambulist stumbling through the streets of New York City. Out of the blackness of the early evening, the camera cranes downward, settling on the somnambulist walking home. He holds his hands in front of him oddly, nearly stumbling into the camera. He crosses paths with a female somnambulist, stopping in front of her. He stares at her as she passes by.

The world around him seems to be going on as usual. Kids play in the street, one of whom quotes a gangster film while role playing with his friends: “What are you, a wise guy?” At the opening of “The Enormous Radio,” Cheever notices this very same change of pace in the city at sundown: “The character of the noise had changed since Irene had tried the radio earlier; the last of the electric razors was being unplugged, the vacuum cleaners had all been returned to their closets, and the static reflected that change in pace that overtakes the city after the sun goes down” (35).

Brakhage’s somnambulist walks up the steps of a tenement house and enters the building. Once inside, the somnambulist is the victim of Brakhage’s experimental technique: the filmmaker scratches the emulsion where the somnambulist’s eyes are located on the filmstrip, thus giving them a white, sparkling magical luster. Brakhage uses this unique image to suggest the somnambulist’s telekinetic power: he can use his alternative sight to think his way into the apartments, where



people are suffering from uncontrollable misery. Cheever uses the technology of auditory modernity (the radio), while Brakhage uses a metaphor of vision (scratched out eyes), in order to arrive at the same place, an indictment of private, intimate relationships in post-war America. While the film revels in its experimentalism, Cheever's story matter-of-factly narrates a fantastic circumstance with droll, ironic narration highlighting its believability.

Furthermore, Brakhage's film's obsession with the power of the somnambulist's eyes to see what is meant to remain hidden is matched by Cheever's narration. While in the elevator in her apartment building, in the days after first listening to the new, magical radio, Irene stares intently at her neighbors, desperately trying to match people's faces with their voices from the radio: "There were a number of women in the elevator when it stopped at her floor. She stared at their handsome and impassive faces, their furs, and the cloth flowers in their hats. Which one of them had been to Sea Island? she wondered. Which one had overdrawn her bank account?" (37-38).

Thus, it is with this expression of communal human misery that Brakhage films that which Cheever writes. The somnambulist envisions the interior spaces of three different apartments. In the first story, we witness a woman in despair. Her husband is shaving. She turns to look at him. He wipes his hands on a towel. His face is covered in shaving cream. He kisses her passionately. She clenches her fist. However, another pan indicates that the act of tenderness was just a desperate desire on the woman's part. The new shot reveals that the wife is still looking at the man shaving, with her fists clenched.

The wife pours coffee out of a pot into a cup. The husband sits down to read the newspaper. She turns into close-up with him behind her. She again imagines him crumpling the paper and looking at her with concern. However, he really does not: he merely continues to read the newspaper. However, something is amiss: the newspaper is in fact crumpled this time! She stands rigid, frustrated. Tilt down to her waist as she holds the coffee cup and saucer. She spills the coffee. He storms off in a huff. We cut to the table: there's an empty cup, but no spilt coffee. The camera pans as she looks at something. The husband seems to have hung himself: we see a swaying shadow against the kitchen door. The camera tracks away from her in isolation. She enters the room: again, we have been tricked. The shadow was merely the husband standing on a chair, changing a light bulb. He has not hung himself. She goes to hug him in desperation. He just stands there inert. The wife repeatedly drops a plate she's been drying, in a loop.

The somnambulist walks up another flight of stairs, envisioning the inside of a second apartment. A woman with glasses and a white sweater greets her husband upon his return home. The man puts a cigarette in his mouth. She makes him a drink. She looks out the window, longingly. She walks away and gets a cigarette for herself. He lights it for her. She takes off her glasses and turns around. He puts his hand on her shoulder. She caresses his hand. She turns and they dance, embracing passionately. They dance, witnessed by us in a low angle shot. He lowers her onto the bed, kissing her. However, all is not well here either. A man enters the apartment with his hands on his hips. The kissing man now has scratched out eyes. Was the woman cheating on her husband?

The male somnambulist walks up the stairs yet again. He now sees a woman inside her apartment. She closes the door, and turns on a gas stove with a match. As opposed to the annoying humming on the soundtrack in the previous two sequences, there is no sound at all in the film's presentation of this third apartment. A coffee pot on the stove comes to a boil. Brakhage cuts to a close-up on the woman's lips. Further close-ups of her caressing her belly with her hands, of her hands together, of her smiling in ecstasy, of her opening her mouth give the sense that this is an orgasmic image. The film ends as the coffee pot boils over in an excess of female sexuality, unrequited and alone.

Just as Brakhage is interested in the emotional power of the seemingly inanimate coffee pot, so too does Cheever symbolically animate the inanimate objects of domesticity:

The elevator shaft in her building ran beside the living-room wall, and it was the noise of the elevator that gave her a clue to the character of the static. The rattling of the elevator cables and the opening and closing of the elevator doors were reproduced in her loudspeaker, and, realizing that the radio was sensitive to electrical currents of all sorts, she began to discern through the Mozart the ringing of telephone bells, the dialing of phones, and the lamentation of a vacuum cleaner. (34)

Thus, Brakhage and Cheever, while very different artists in their sensibilities and in their uses of their respective media, can be seen to be fellow travelers in an early 1950s critique of the alienating effects of individualized, corporate America. This is the power of an imaginative intertextual criticism as applied to the relationship between Brakhage's experimental cinema and Cheever's literary text.

V. Conclusion

Traditionally, studies of film adaptation have focused on novels converted to feature-length narrative cinema. Given the academy's suspicion of commercial Hollywood cinema, and its privileging of non-commercial literary culture, one would expect a similar attention to non-commercial cinema in film studies. However, given the importance of the film festival circuit for the exchange of non-Hollywood cinema, there is a shocking lack of attention in adaptation studies, or the rest of film studies, for that matter, to short film narratives. This essay has intended to fill some of this void in the literature, by focusing on experimental cinema, a significant domain of short filmmaking. How can we further expand the domain of adaptation studies into the realm of short cinema and experimental film studies? This is both a theoretical, but also a practical matter, for film studies. Many of our undergraduate students come to the University to learn how to make films. In production courses, they are given the opportunity to make short five to ten minute films. Film studies would do well to try to aid this pedagogical effort by focusing more attention on accomplished short films for filmmaking students to learn to emulate.

Experimental cinema is one of the three major modes of cinema, and while most efforts in this mode are highly original by definition, it is most definitely the case that an attention to adaptation studies methods will allow this mode of

cinema to be illuminated in new ways. I chose adaptation studies and experimental cinema as my focus here because, as an adaptation studies scholar, I observe how literary the criticism of experimental cinema is, despite the generally non-literary qualities of the films themselves.

And yet, little attention has been directed to the sorts of questions regularly posed in a journal such as *Literature/Film Quarterly* in the field of experimental film studies. This is because not many, if any, experimental films adapt novels, the most common process for narrative generation in the mainstream Hollywood cinema. As a poetic mode of filmmaking, the work of Emerson and Whitman figures immensely in American experimental filmmaking, as P. Adams Sitney argues in his recent book, *Eyes Upside Down*. But Sitney uses an antiquated literary studies language, inherited from his study of Romanticism under Harold Bloom in the 1960s. We can do better than this.

In this essay, I suggested three paths for conceiving of the relationship between experimental films and literary texts. In *The Sin of Jesus*, we find a traditional one-to-one adaptation case study, the conversion of Isaac Babel's short story into a film by Robert Frank. Second, *Moby-Dick* is a radical referential intertext for *Egg*, a film that carnivalizes the Melville original for the purposes of representing the horrors of bodily consumption. Finally, an imaginative intertextual method allows the seemingly unrelated *Reflections on Black* and "The Enormous Radio" to be brought into each other's orbit in order to show how experimental film and a *New Yorker* short story dovetail in their presentation of post-war, middle-class, marital alienation.

And yet, the purpose of this essay lies not just in detailing these three methods. While the three case studies were chosen for their methodological play, I have also tried to show how intertextual analysis leads toward unexpected connections, between the ova metaphors in both *The Sin of Jesus* and *Egg*, between the interior worlds of oppressed femininity in *The Sin of Jesus* and *Reflections on Black*. The power of a broadly conceived adaptation studies is that it is empowered to find compelling and meaningful cultural connections between disparate texts. How many more methods for interrogating the adaptational possibilities of experimental cinema are there? How many more case studies of experimental films, newly illuminated by the light of literature, can be unearthed? What new insights across media will be discovered by re-invigorating our attention to a wider variety of objects of study in our discipline?

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Notes

¹ After having this article accepted for publication in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, my colleague Tom Leitch called my attention to a wonderful recent essay in the British journal, *Adaptation*: "What Becomes of Things on Film on Film: Adaptation in Owen Land (Landow)." J. D. Connor argues that, "the importance of adaptation in studies of the American structural film movement has been underestimated" (161). Connor studies the experimental films of George Landow, particularly *Remedial*

Reading Comprehension (1971) in which lessons in how to read become metaphors for the cinematic spectator relevant to adaptation studies: “comprehension becomes a two-way street, one that both requires and makes possible reciprocal adaptation” (164). Within the essay’s theoretical argument, a linkage to the philosophical film studies of Stanley Cavell, George Landow becomes a post-structural, adaptation filmmaker: “For Land only in unfaithful adaptation does the meaning of the original become clear” (169). I am delighted that Connor and I would simultaneously gravitate toward a nexus of adaptation and experimental film studies. The differences between his philosophical-theoretical approach, and my literary criticism methods, indicate that there is a wide terrain such new work might cover.

² My sincere thanks to experimental science filmmaker Kate Lain for first showing *Egg* to me in the spring of 2009.

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