

### **Good Work, Little Soldier: text and pretext**

Adaptation, the most explicit kind of intertextual relation implicating film, is not really intertextual at all, if intertextuality is understood to be a systematic, ongoing and infinite ramification of meanings that command our critical pause. But if we apply a more restricted model from literary theory, centred on a 'centring text which retains its position of leadership in meaning',<sup>1</sup> adaptation can be read through a variation of this model: pretextuality. Film-on-book relations are generally pretextual: the adapted text as point of departure, as party in a dialogue, as measure of a difference, as mirror.

*Beau travail* has two pretexts, a book and a film: Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1891) and Godard's *Le petit soldat* (1960). The first is the kind of pretext familiar from cinematic adaptations of literary works, though it is made strange by reference to an intermediate operatic adaptation (Britten's *Billy Budd*). The second is of a quite unfamiliar kind, a variant of cinematic pretextuality that may be peculiar to *Beau travail*. Most comparable instances of character and actor reappearing in a different director's film would be from sequels or episodes in series,<sup>2</sup> but though Michel Subor plays Bruno Forestier in both films, *Beau travail* is not, in narrative terms, a sequel to *Le petit soldat*. A more exact idea of the film-on-film relations that bind the two films is the object of this article.

'Pretext and intertext' is not a categorical distinction: pretextuality is just over-determined intertextuality. Reference to a text's pretext is determined by the text itself, or its paratexts. We know *Billy Budd, Sailor* is a pretext of *Beau travail* because the disposition of characters and setting of the one corresponds sufficiently to that of the other, because one makes explicit reference to the other, and because in interviews and other publicity material we are told as much. Likewise, more or less, for *Beau travail*'s use of *Le petit soldat*.

Pretextual reading is an exercise in 'explication': the later text is read through its correspondence to and divergence from the precedent, construing the former as reading of the latter. *Beau travail*'s difference from its pretexts is a comment on them: the survival of Sentain in Denis's film substitutes secular transcendence for the spiritual apotheosis of Budd in Melville's book; the name Galoup, similarly, is a secularisation of Melville's John Claggart (J.C.); Galoup's shift to the present tense of past-tense phrases borrowed from *Le petit soldat* identifies the temporal ambiguity of narration in the earlier film; Subor's silence in the mirror scene of *Beau travail* reflects upon his prolixity in *Le petit soldat*.

Reference to the intertext is a less determined relation: the text may signpost another text, but the reader must interpret that signposting as a sanction to bring the two texts together. When the opening lines of *Le petit soldat* are attributed in Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) to the wise professor who is to be assassinated, an intertext is opened up that enables not only a reading of Bertolucci against Godard, disciple and master, but positions Bertolucci's star Jean-Louis Trintignant vis-à-vis Michel Subor, (physically similar actors both associated with Vadim and Bardot), such that Trintignant's

performance is impossible not to read as a revision of Subor's. The title of Godard's *Le petit soldat* indicates a reference to Paul Grimault's 1947 cartoon *Le petit soldat*, but Grimault's film is not Godard's pretext. Read against each other, the two *petits soldats* generate a reading in which elaborate figurations of post-WW2 melancholy is the intertext. When, in the 1960 film, Bruno Forestier is called a 'petit prince', that melancholy is inflected through association with Saint-Exupéry. The first word of the title *Beau travail* signposts not a single text but that large intertext of Foreign Legion narratives of which P.C. Wren's 1924 novel *Beau Geste* is a pretext. Any one of these narratives brought into relation to *Beau travail* – Duvivier's 1935 *La Bandera*, Wellman's 1939 *Beau Geste*, Van Damme's 1998 *Legionnaire* – produces an intertextual reading.

This article confines itself to *Le petit soldat* as pretext, more specifically to the pretextual materials with which it supplies *Beau travail*. As well as an actor and a character, *Le petit soldat* provides *Beau travail* with a mode of narration. These three kinds of material are discussed below under separate headings.

## 1. Actor

Without Michel Subor, the connection between *Beau travail* and *Le petit soldat* would not have been made, neither by Claire Denis nor by subsequent viewers. Denis's first pretext was Melville's story. When cast, eventually, for the Captain Vere role, Subor brought with him his own cinematic past as pretext, providing Denis with a resource on which to draw (Subor 2000). However, given that, prior to *Beau travail*, Subor had made only about twenty films, almost all mediocre – the highlights are a starring role in Vadim's *Le bride sur le cou* (1961), opposite Brigitte Bardot, and a supporting role in Hitchcock's *Topaz* – this cinematic past was, effectively, *Le petit soldat* and nothing else. The film provides the Subor of *Beau travail* with the name, Bruno Forestier, that belonged to the character he played in 1960, and with physical attitudes belonging to the actor he was in 1960.

Thematically, both films are concerned with the body – as object of torture in the first and, in the second, of the gaze. The physical presence of Subor in both is a conduit of contrasts, but not exactly in these terms. In *Beau travail* the torture is forgotten, and his body is not an object of physical speculation. Instead, we look at his face. The transformation of his physiognomy over time is made brutally evident when the first image we are invited to examine,<sup>3</sup> a glamorous studio portrait of Subor circa 1960, is followed by close scrutiny of Subor circa 1997, aged and weary. The contrast – indeed Subor's performance in *Beau travail* as a whole – serves as a commentary on the opening words of *Le petit soldat*: 'For me the time for action has passed. I've aged. The time for reflection is beginning' (Godard 1961A, p.23; all translations from the French are mine).

*Beau travail* borrows from *Le petit soldat* Subor's discovery of the face as site of both physical and metaphysical reflection. His fourth look in *Le petit soldat* is delivered after looking into the mirror, and accompanies this speech:

Apart from our selves, our own faces, our own voices, we have nothing. But perhaps that's what's important. Recognising the sound of your own voice and

the shape of your own face. From inside, it's like this [Subor covers his face with his hands as he looks in the mirror] and when I look at it, it's like this [Subor turns to camera and draws his hands away from his face] They look at me and they don't know what I'm thinking, they'll never know what I'm thinking. [...] I try to capture my own thoughts. And my words? Where do words come from?

The fourth look in *Beau travail* is first ironised, since it is delivered by the studio portrait of the young Subor, then avoided by angled shots of the older Subor/Forestier looking into the mirror, and is finally delivered, after his character's name has been spoken by Galoup, by a silent Subor, looking into the camera. In that silence a pretextual reading hears Subor's speech from *Le petit soldat*.

## 2. Character

Early in *Le petit soldat*, the main figure of the film comments reflexively on his story so far: 'So far, my story has been simple. It's the story of a man with no ideal. And tomorrow?' *Beau travail* would appear to be answering Forestier's question when, fifteen minutes in and thirty-eight years on, the story is taken up again. Forestier is conjured up by name, almost ritually. The name appears as sound and image, spoken by Galoup and inscribed on an identity bracelet in his hand. Moreover, the voiceover quotes the younger Forestier:

Bruno ... Bruno Forestier. A deep feeling of solitude overcomes me when I think of my commanding officer. I've had great respect and affection for Forestier. My commandant. He had been dogged by a rumour following the Algerian war. He never confided in me. He said that he was a man without an ideal, a soldier without ambition. I admired him deeply without understanding why. He knew I was a perfect legionnaire, and didn't care. Bruno... Bruno Forestier.

The reiterated voicing of the name announces an intertextual enigma: Galoup appears to be remembering *Le petit soldat*, quoting the last mention of the name in Godard's film, five minutes from the end when a recording of Forestier pronouncing his own name is played back: 'C'est Bruno, Bruno Forestier'. The suggestion that Galoup knows the cinematic pretext of *Beau travail* is borne out by the quotation already noted – 'a man with no ideal' –and by further borrowings of detailed phraseology from the earlier film (discussed below).

The image of the name that doubles up its sounding might serve, eventually, as emblem of *Beau travail*'s textual supplementarity; more immediately it poses an enigma internal to the story of *Beau travail*: how did Galoup acquire his commanding officer's identity bracelet? Odder still, Galoup has the photograph of Forestier as a young man (which is not, of course, a military-style identity photograph or a personal snapshot, but a portrait of the film star Michel Subor). These two tokens suggest a back-story of intimacy between the two that remains a 'vague field for unfavorable surmise'. Forestier's previous life related in another film ought perhaps to have resolved such narrative enigmas, but in *Le petit soldat* there was no Galoup, and nothing to explain what kind of relationship might pertain between the two men in the later film. *Beau travail* teases the

viewer by referring to a rumour about Forestier's activities in the Algerian war, and it may be that we are to understand this to concern his desertion from the French army or his service as an assassin in a French counter-terrorist unit (story elements of *Le petit soldat*), but it is hard to imagine such stories as scandalous – even in the modern, de-romanticised Foreign Legion.

Pursuing intertextual rather than narrative traces, the unsubstantiated report emerges as a motif transferred from *Beau travail*'s other pretext, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, where the rumour concerns the Galoup figure, Claggart:

Among certain grizzled sea gossips of the gun decks and fore-castle went a rumor perdué that the master-at-arms was a *chevalier* who had volunteered into the King's navy by way of compounding for some mysterious swindle whereof he had been arraigned at the King's Bench. The fact that nobody could substantiate this report was, of course, nothing against its secret currency. Such a rumor once started on the gun decks in reference to almost anyone below the rank of a commissioned officer would, during the period assigned to this narrative, have seemed not altogether wanting in credibility to the tarry old wiseacres of a man-of-war crew. And indeed a man of Claggart's accomplishments, without prior nautical experience entering the navy at mature life, as he did, and necessarily allotted at the start to the lowest grade in it; a man too who never made allusion to his previous life ashore; these were circumstances which in the dearth of exact knowledge as to his true antecedents opened to the invidious a vague field for unfavorable surmise. (Melville 1985, p.343)

A similar transfer has Forestier in *Beau travail* deliver a line that in Melville's text is spoken not by Captain Vere, the Forestier figure, but by an anonymous officer:

'... I have heard that I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man's door in Bristol.'  
'Found, say you? Well,' throwing back his head and looking up and down the new recruit; 'well, it turns out to have been a pretty good find.' (Melville 1985, p.330)

'I was found in a stairwell.'  
'Found? Fuck. At least it's been a good find.'<sup>4</sup>

These shifts signal the composite nature of Forestier's character in *Beau travail*: he is largely Captain Vere, but has parts from other characters. Of the younger Forestier he has very little: almost nothing of his earlier character has survived. The former's energy is now languor, his loquacity now a laconic brooding. The physical resemblance is, as already suggested, largely a function of the first kind of pretextual material exploited in *Beau travail*: Denis's Forestier is in large part Subor. The third kind, borrowed fragments of narration, actually undermines the persistence of character across the two films.

### 3. Narrator

Where the narrator of *Le petit soldat* finishes, the narrator of *Beau travail* begins: 'I was content, because I had lots of time ahead of me' (Forestier's last words in *Le petit soldat*); 'Marseilles, the end of February. I've time ahead of me now' (Galoup's first words in *Beau travail*). If the persistence of phraseology across the two films were evidence, the two narrators would demonstrably be one and the same:

So far, my story has been simple. It's the story of a man without an ideal. [...] I had lost my first serious battle. A deep feeling of solitude overcame me. But perhaps with remorse comes freedom. (*Le petit soldat*)

My story is simple. [...] he said that he was a man without an ideal. [...] A deep feeling of solitude overcomes me when I think of my commanding officer. [...] Perhaps with remorse comes freedom. Perhaps with remorse comes freedom, I've heard that somewhere. (*Beau travail*)

Such a composite narrator is unfeasible, at the level of story. At best, the story could either show that Forestier had, through their close contact, communicated to Galoup his turns of phrase – he did say to Galoup that he was a man 'without an ideal' – or the story could figure Galoup deliberately contrasting not only his simple story and Forestier's – 'mon histoire'/'mon histoire' -- but also his discourse and Forestier's. But where, we must ask, did Galoup hear that 'perhaps freedom comes with remorse'? At the cinema, evidently. Here is the further evidence that Galoup knows the cinematic pretext of *Beau travail*. Once again, enigmas in the storyline are resolved in the intertext.

Galoup, like Forestier, is a composite character: he is largely Melville's Claggart, but is also, in part, Godard's Forestier. (And he is, of course, as has been remarked elsewhere, in large part Denis Lavant, the actor having brought with him his own cinematic past as pretext, a resource on which Claire Denis draws, especially for the closing sequence.)

At the level of discourse, certainly, the narrations of the two films are not 'simple'. Both render untenable the conventional separation of voice and image into discourse and story. *Le petit soldat* features an image-story superimposing three different historical moments (May 1958, January 1960 and April 1960), delivered by a voice-discourse that at times fits into that chronology and at others is entirely out of time. The narration's opening and close, especially, speak of the events of the story as of a distant past: 'For me the time for action has passed. I've aged'; 'I had lots of time ahead of me.'<sup>5</sup>

The narration of *Beau travail* has three modes of delivery – voice, image and writing – and in each of these constituent parts is marked as problematic. Galoup's voice-discourse, as we have seen, knows too well the voice-discourses of the past to bear reliable witness in the present. The image-story in *Beau travail* is as complicated as that of *Le petit soldat*, though the superimposed events are psychologically, not historically, determined; they are moments to be distinguished not as points along a time-line but as the conflict between memory and desire within the narrator. Hence they become functions of discourse, not story. This image-story is famously difficult to resolve: indeed the films avoids resolution by ending with the enigma of Galoup in the discotheque.

Galoup's formal narration in fact opens as writing, not voice. It is delivered as an image emerging from the water, his journal in close-up as he writes it:

All this will have made of my life a pitiful farce, a stupid mess. I am a profoundly ridiculous man. Yes, ridiculous. All this is botched. At the start, everything depends on the option, the angle of attack.

It is not the words misspelt ('gachi' for 'gâchis', 'profondement' for 'profondément', 'debut' for 'début', 'depend' for 'dépend', 'obtion' for 'option') that undermine the journal's testimony. If anything they are, for the story, signs of authenticity, of a correspondence between character and textuality. But the spoken words that follow the image of the journal deliver a different version of Galoup's commentary on the past: 'I've botched everything from a certain point of view, and many things depend on the point of view, the angle of attack.' This says more or less the same thing, but the slight non-correspondence of voice and text draws attention to their radical difference. If these two diverge from the outset, any further narratorial discrepancies should not come as a surprise. The composite narration of *Beau travail* is, like the narration of *Le petit soldat*, radically unreliable.

*Beau travail* is not, clearly cannot be, an adaptation of *Le petit soldat* in the sense that it is an adaptation of *Billy Budd, Sailor*. (Then again, it is not an adaptation of Melville's text in any commonly understood sense.) It seems impossible not to read *Beau travail* through its divergence from Melville, and it may seem so too as regards divergence from Godard: if it was not comparison with Forestier's narration in *Le petit soldat* that revealed Galoup's narratorial unreliability, the composite quality of Galoup's character was exposed by reference to Godard's film, and the sense of Subor's presence in *Beau travail* was made explicit thereby.

Pretextuality forecloses the abyssal intertext of infinite ramification, affirming the autonomy of the text-pretext relation. In Denis's film, the explicit pointers to *Le petit soldat* are end-stopped: there is nothing beyond them, nothing hidden in *Le petit soldat* that will illuminate *Beau travail*. The vis-à-vis of the two films is self-sufficient, a reflexivity thematised and motivated in both, as each reflects the other in its mirror, abyssally.

## Filmography

*Beau travail* (Claire Denis, France, 1998)

*Il conformista/The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, Italy/France/West Germany, 1970)

*Le petit soldat/The Little Soldier* (Paul Grimault, France, 1947)

*Le petit soldat/The Little Soldier* (Jean-Luc Godard, France/Switzerland, 1960 [1963])

## Bibliography

Godard, Jean-Luc (1961A). 'Le petit soldat (bande paroles)', 1, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 113.

Godard, Jean-Luc (1961B). 'Le petit soldat (bande paroles)', 2, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 114.

Iampolski, Mikhail (1998). *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Lack, Roland-François (2003). 'The Point in Time: Precise Chronology in Early Godard', *Studies in French Cinema*, 3:2.

Melville, Herman (1985). *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, ed. Harold Beaver (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

Subor, Michel (2000). 'Un dilettante', interview in *Les Inrockuptibles* (3 May 2000).

---

<sup>1</sup> Laurent Jenny, quoted in Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*, p. 36. Hereinafter references are given in text.

<sup>2</sup> The return of Eddie Constantine as Lemmy Caution in Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), after seven preceding appearances between 1953 and 1963 (mostly directed by Bernard Borderie) comes too close in time to compare with the thirty-eight years that separate *Le petit soldat* and *Beau travail*; better is his return in Josée Dayan's *Le retour de Lemmy Caution* (1989) or in Godard's *Allemagne 90 neuf zéro* (1991), but in all these instances Constantine returns as the main figure in the story, which is not the case of the returning character in Denis's film. Constantine's cameo appearance as Lemmy Caution in *Makaroni Blues* (Csepcsanyi and Sassebo, Norway, 1986) might resemble more closely the *Petit soldat/Beau travail* pattern, but I have not seen the film to verify. Other variants on the pattern (kindly suggested by subscribers to the 'Cinemaville' and 'Film-Philosophy' salons): Marc Michel as Laurent Cassard in Demy's *Lola* (1961) and in Demy's *Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964); Anouk Aimée as Lola in Demy's *Lola* and in the same director's *Model Shop* (1969); Paul Newman as Fast Eddie Felson in Rossen's *The Hustler* (1961) and Scorsese's *The Color of Money* (1985); Dick Miller as Walter Paisley in Corman's *Bucket of Blood* (1959) and Dante's *The Howling* (1981); Michael Keaton as Ray Nicolette in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997) and Soderbergh's *Out of Sight* (1998). Of a different order are the starring or cameo reappearances of double acts like Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne (Charters and Caldicott in Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, Reed's *Night Train to Munich*, Baxter's *Crook's Tour*, Launder and Gilliat's *Millions Like Us*) or Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith (Jay and Silent Bob in Smith's *Clerks*, *Mallrats*, *Chasing Amy*, *Dogma* and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, and in Wes Craven's *Scream 3*).

<sup>3</sup> There is a brief medium shot inserted a few minutes earlier of as yet unidentified Forestier reading a newspaper.

---

<sup>4</sup> The French of Forestier's words suggests again a privileging of intertextual troping over narrative consistencies: 'belle trouvaille' echoes 'beau travail', so that the title of Denis's film can be read in palimpsest as an affirmed aesthetic of appropriation. What Denis finds in Godard are, then, 'belles trouvailles'.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of *Le petit soldat*'s complex temporality see R.-F. Lack, 'The Point in Time: Precise Chronology in Early Godard', *Studies in French Cinema*, 3:2 (Autumn 2003).