

**THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC INNARDS OF JOSEPH  
HELLER'S *CATCH-22*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Joseph Heller wrote a few quite cinematographic novels. His most famous one, *Catch-22*, has a discontinuous and non-chronological structure. In addition, it displays a lengthy string of events. All these traits stimulated the shot of two cinema versions and a script. While the novel is massive, the movie transcriptions retained the most spectacular scenes. The spectacle in the novel has a twofold nature: one highlights the absurdity of war and military camps; the other one stresses the brutality and cruelty of war. Oscillating between framing and montage, these intersemiotic translations of the novel capture the ineffable expressivity of a disturbing narration.

**Keywords:** Joseph Heller; *Catch-22*; framing; montage; intersemiotic translation.

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### 1. Introduction

This article will rely on the parallel between constructing textual war-narratives and visual war-narratives. Apart from making use of absurd and maniacal perspectivism, there will be an analysis of the techniques of framing and montage in passing from text to text-to-be-moved-into-image. This transfer of message between different systems of signs is called intersemiotic transfer. Of course, the script remains a textual enterprise, but it resorts to a textual selection with the purpose of creating subsequently a series of images. The research will take aim at the way and means of selecting the message in order to configure the intersemiotic translation and will try to figure out the effectiveness of such a “distillation” of perspective and meaning.

Part of Joseph Heller’s novels benefit of a cinematographic construction. *Catch-22* (1961) is the most suitable in this respect as, apart from the event-filled narration, it is based on a discontinuous and amalgamated structure. As it is well known, the novel is built around the skepticism of Captain Yossarian about an army led by greedy and dictatorial officers. This article will focus on a the part 1.1 of script inspired by the novel with sparse hints to the classical screened version of *Catch-22*. The authors of this script are the Australians Luke Davies (writer) and David Michôd (actor, producer, and director) and it constituted the base for the television miniseries *Catch-22* from 2019. My interest revolved around the selection of events practiced by the scriptwriters and the way they outlined the dialogs. The theoretical cargo involves the austerity that instills the movies of Michelangelo Antonioni in parallel with the difference between framing and montage as explained by Gilles Deleuze (in Marrati, P., 2008).

The absurd of the human condition is derived by Albert Camus from the determination of apprehending the world as an intelligible unity: “The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operation, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity” (Camus, 1955, p. 13).

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### **2. The absurd and the structure of the novel as reflected in the film script**

History reveals a persistent occurrence of irregularities and actions that often defy comprehension. This leads to a profound incongruity between rational thought and the ambiguous, chaotic nature of the world. In this context of “nostalgia for unity” and the “unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, 1955, p 21), Camus identified the origins of absurdity in human experience.

The phenomenon described as an “appetite for clarity” (Camus, 1955, p. 13) represents a paradigm of entrapment for individuals, as the functioning of the world appears to be distorted and marked by inefficiency. It could be posited that wars serve as manifestations of this inefficacy. Camus astutely anticipated this complex absurdity of existence, asserting that “if the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and impotencies” (Camus 14).

The most successful survivor is characterized by an alignment with the prevailing irrationalities of the world or by a profound skepticism regarding the established structures and propositions that govern it.

There are two film adaptations of the novel *Catch-22*. I will discuss the first version tangentially, but I will focus mainly on a 2017 screenplay written by Luke Davies and David Michôd and based on Joseph Heller’s novel.

The film preserves the chronology and the interrupted line of events, facts easy to achieve given that the novel is designed for a cinematic vision. Of course, cinema offers the advantage of special effects and expressive close-ups. But I will come back to these aspects.

The pilot project highlights the spectacular effects, especially during the bombings, using fade-ups, swirling smoke, and fleeting silhouettes “in the swirl and confusion” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 1). Impressionistic and expressionistic techniques are used to enhance the chiaroscuro effect, but also the sound effect: “The persistent rumble of those powerful

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engines” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 1). The apocalyptic vision consists of the fleeting appearances of a naked man. The spotlights will follow this figure and the suggestion is revealed by the screenwriters themselves: “Walking through some other circle of Dante’s *Inferno*” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 2).

### **3. Cinematicity relying on mania**

The first installment of the script (Davies and Michôd, 2019), employs an array of special effects, echoing the cinematic approach of the film it accompanies. However, the focus is primarily on the dialogues and exchanges, which are laced with serial allusions to comic and absurd actions and reactions. For example, the characters Yossarian and Marion are described as engaging in “beautifully enthusiastic sex” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 1). In both the novel and the script, Yossarian is portrayed as a hedonistic figure with a desire for polyamorous relationships, yet he is thwarted in his pursuits by a vengeful deity, depicted as a “brainless conceited hayseed” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 2). Through this characterization, Heller reopens age-old discussions regarding the nature of God, particularly in relation to human suffering and decay. He positions his character as a mouthpiece for quasi-theological debates and constructs his narrative — subsequently adapted into various scripts — as a polyphonic exploration. Although Yossarian, as a hedonist, may not embody the role of an analytical Gnostic, his contentions resonate powerfully against the otherwise superficial and intellectually vacuous dialogues found throughout the work.

One very important strategy in switching from text to cinematographic script was the selection of episodes relying heavily on some characters’ manias. Whether they be of material/ somatic sort or of psychic extraction, the script laces them with the purpose of highlighting the stereotypical and twisted minds of those in command. Of course, the novel is richer in such instances, but it also exposed innocent jokes and dramatic actions which were not selected for the script.

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The intricate structure of the narrative encompasses a multitude of cinematic episodes, with one notable highlight being the comedic interlude involving the parade training of Lieutenant Scheisskopf, whose German name translates to “Shithead”. This character exemplifies a unique obsession. Heller employs a rather direct approach in character development, eschewing nuanced representation in favor of an unvarnished depiction of his traits and shortcomings. For example, Scheisskopf is described as “prowling the ranks of men barking his particular brand of lunacy at them like a beardless Lear with a military buzzcut” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 4). Moreover, the author exhibits a marked irreverence towards both the tumultuous history of the United States and the Western literary canon, demonstrating little regard for established norms in his narrative.

In his analysis of Michelangelo Antonioni’s films, Bert Cardullo highlights the concept of austerity in artistic expression:

When I say austerity and restraint I certainly don’t mean narrowness of imagination or skimpiness of theme. I mean a cinema with silences and absences that can reveal more than thick, dense presences—the hurly-burly activity with which it is all too easy for a filmmaker to clot our eyes (Cardullo, 2009, p. 62)

In contrast, Joseph Heller and those who adapted his narratives — whether screenwriters or directors — did not pursue austerity in their creative endeavors. This divergence may stem from the inherently brutal nature of war, which itself embodies a stark form of austerity.

In *Catch-22*, it is easy to identify absurd yet visually striking actions which often serve to highlight the robotic and pointless mindset of the officers, particularly in wartime. For example, the parade master, Scheisskopf, embodies this senselessness when he demands, “Why can you not walk a straight line? Why can you not turn a ninety-degree angle after eleven weeks?” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 5). However, the most compelling aspect of the novel’s visual absurdity lies in its dialogue, which turns ridiculous questions into a kind of

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warped logic. Take Cadet Clevinger, for instance, he attempts to provide logical and useful answers to these nonsensical demands, naively believing that the war machine operates on principles of logic and efficiency. This reflects a counterpoint technique, where the logic of his responses is at odds with the overwhelming absurdity of the situation. Yossarian, the novel's primary critic of this madness, recognizes the absurdity of perfection in such trivial tasks. For example, Scheisskopf's directive, "And the hundred dollar question: Why is it so hard to restrict the swing of your arms to a maximum seven-inch lateral pendulum arc, with a maximum four-inch distance from wrist to thigh?" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 6), reveals the ridiculousness of these expectations.

### **4. The danger of logic and culture in a robotized universe**

The 'disposable man', the anonymous soldier perceived by officers and politicians as a humble tool, must be completely robotized to perform preposterous tasks perfectly. Scheisskopf menaces:

I have a friend in the sheet metal shop and he could make me little pegs of nickel alloy and I could sink them into each man's thigh bones and link them to the wrists by strands of copper wire with exactly three and a half inches of play (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 7)

Only Yossarian understands the criminal nature of this absurdity. He dissuades his comrades from demanding logic and justification. He fulfills the role of a pedagogical Joker: "What's here to understand. They hate you. They hated you before you got here. They hate you while you're here. And they're going to keep on hating you after you leave" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 9). Back home or in the netherworld – my addition.

The sad absurdity is compounded by the victims' own justification of the torturous methods and approaches of their oppressors. Apart from complying without much questioning to the aberrations inflicted on them by their superiors, soldiers:

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“Yossarian: ‘Tell me one thing that’s not meaningless about parades.

Clevinger: Discipline. Chain of command. Working together as a unit. Geometry” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 12).

The dialectic of master and slave works perfectly as long as the plebeians are offered the opportunity to experience vulgar pleasures. At this point, Yossarian’s multifaceted and flexible nature emerges: he also belongs to the hedonist group, but he manages to safeguard and affirm his noble human essence. He is the only one who de-mythologizes the ludicrous military and warfare mythology and tries tirelessly to re-humanize his peers.

*Parades aren’t designed to teach us anything. They’re designed to humiliate us. [...] because apparently that’s how sadists get their kicks. And we can sit here and pretend all we want that there must be some noble purpose to all this walking around in fucking rectangles, but there isn’t one* (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 13).

When Yossarian realizes the passivity and self-deception of his comrades, he chooses the hospital over reality.

Despite his skeptical wisdom, Yossarian cannot escape the perverse military machine, especially since he is perceived as a bad influence on his less subtle peers. The script portrays Yossarian being punished alongside the stubborn and naive Clevinger. The former is punished for the latter daring to faint during a parade.

This is the pinnacle of absurdity and dictatorial behavior in military-oriented organizations. The pseudo-dialogue between the reasoning Clevinger and his commander is particularly absurd. Clevinger believes in his innocence on the basis of the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, common law and the Military Code of Justice, while Scheisskopf brands all these as crap. The former has a mind filled with theories that are completely at odds with the harsh reality he belongs to. He acts like a naive idealist who is unable to cope with the world’s lack of logic and pervasive evil.

The source of the disagreement between the two is the issue of punishment without question. Any questioning on the

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part of the soldier would only worsen his situation. Logical discussions are simply impossible and undesirable in the military:

CLEVINGER: I'm sorry, sir. I never said you couldn't punish me.'

SCHEISSKOPF: Now you're telling us when you did say it. I'm asking you to tell us when you did say it. When did you say we couldn't punish you?" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 20)

Thus, Heller constructs a perfectly structured absurd environment.

"SCHEISSKOPF: Is that the only time you didn't say it?" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 22).

The officer simply cannot grasp the concept of "justice". Yet he is supposedly taking part in a war fought to re-establish justice. In this way, the novelist – most probably unwillingly – questions the positive role played by the American army in WWII. How could an army under the command of idiots, crooks, and dictators stand for peace, harmony, and justice in the world?

### **5. Anti-heroes or semi-heroes. Psychological limitations**

The sources of humor and burlesque in such a mechanized and soulless society are innumerable. One scene (INT. BEDROOM – DAY) sheds light on Marion, Scheisskopf's wife, who is now on the high track of psychological investigation after having sex with Yossarian. Marion sleeps with the officer's subordinates, which could explain her husband's inferiority complex manifesting as domineering behavior.

MARION: *"Do you sleep with me because you like me, or because you hate my husband?"*

Yossarian retorts with the same analytical subtlety:

*"A bit of both. I could ask you the same question".* (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 23)

In Heller's universes, whether military or corporate, there is this romantic Moira, the price of sin, but in a posterous



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manner. A versatile and ironic god steers the fate of a crazy, out-of-joint world.

For example, Yossarian is recognized as the troublesome anti-hero of the squadron because he cares deeply for his comrades while the number of bombing missions increases. Unlike many young Americans, he did not share the general enthusiasm for war, which is why he joined the air corps. He believed the war would not last long, knowing that bomber crews needed extensive training. However, he was mistaken, as he lacked the intellectual curiosity to seek out knowledge and information.

Both the script and the film strive to expressively render the special visual effects. However, the script uses metaphors, whereas the film is not interested in capturing them: "Ping, thump, and clatter all around. Puffs of flak blooming through the plexiglass around Yossarian's head like deadly black flowers" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 25).

In terms of superior mimesis, Yossarian does not emerge as a heroic figure. Not even in terms of human relations. While he is less dehumanized than his superiors and other officers, he is not truly empathetic towards those in need around him. Although he is affected by the horrors of war, his human radar does not detect the misfortune of others. For example, when a new cadet is assigned to his tent, Yossarian looks unhappy and carelessly directs Mudd, the newcomer, to the wrong administrative tent. Mudd ends up in the tent of Lieutenant Colonel Korn and inadvertently becomes involved in a bombing mission, where he meets his death. Upon hearing the news, Yossarian does not feel too guilty.

*ORR (to YOSSARIAN): You heard a plane went down this afternoon?*

*YOSSARIAN: Yeah, I heard.*

*ORR: Mudd was on it.*

*YOSSARIAN: Who's Mudd?*

*MILO: He was that kid in your tent.*

*YOSSARIAN: Oh, shit. (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 27)*

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### **6. The type of humor and the way of shooting it**

Generally speaking, the humor is bluff, as Heller is not an intellectual writer. His grassroots approach only allows for a close reading of a matter-of-fact yet preposterous society. For example, there is a sergeant named Major Major Major. His bombastic name serves as his destiny, following Laurence Sterne's theory that people's names are fateful. Thus, Sergeant Major Major Major will become a real major, despite his reluctance to accept such a precipitous promotion.

The shot conceived as movement-image has two components: framing and montage. If framing focuses on moving parts in space, montage focuses on time and works with continuities, false continuities and cuts (Marrati, 2008, p. 44).

The script also features the abominable figure of Milo Minderbinder, the unscrupulous salesman who embodies the commercial side of the American Dream and its Puritan roots. The New Jerusalem established in the USA is supposed to be bountiful. Business success is the epitome of God's covenant. Consequently, the army's public mission gives precedence to private money laundering interests. As Milo puts it: "Ours is a mercantile world" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 39). This facet of the Hellenesque comedy emphasizes the incongruity and perversity of the officers who demand heroism from the rank-and-file soldiers. Milo tells Major de Coverley, "We shouldn't have to miss the strudel, sir" (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 40).

### **7. From text to moving images**

Airborne battle scenes are transcribed in a literary manner in the script. The authors must have been aware of the impossibility to capture textual metaphors on the screen, but they could not resist the temptation. Luckily, there are plenty of indices about emotional close-ups: "SPLATS horrifically into Yossarian's nose cone-like a bug onto a windscreen – inches from Yossarian's own equally horrified, equally uncomprehending face. Dunbar hangs there for a millisecond, with that final look of

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terror on his face, before being swooped into the roaring void.” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 42).

Another strategy is to highlight oxymoronic attitudes during the fight: the gruesome realism mingled with a New Sensibility type of Adamic reaction:

a smear of BLOOD - a gruesome trace of Dunbar's impact with the nose cone. The wind buffeting the blood in a raked pattern as it trickles across the plexiglas. All is NOISE and CHAOS and RATTLING and SHOUTING inside the plane, but for just an instant Yossarian is like a child studying a snowflake. The wonder of nature. (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 43)

The spectacular riffraff of sky confrontations helps a lot to increase the dynamism of the script, but it completely misses whatever humorous effects: “EXTERIOR: meanwhile back outside, the extraordinary high altitude ballet of ten planes peeling off in all directions in a sky spackled with flak, as huge explosions thump and bloom on the ground thousands of feet below.” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 44).

The film version plentifully used military technology to increase absurd comic effects. For instance, the mercantile lunatic discussions between Milo Minderbinder and Colonel Cathcart right on the runway in the middle of a desert. Meanwhile, planes crash and fire brigade automobiles shoot past them in an Inferno-like atmosphere.

What seduced the scriptwriters was the paradoxical syllogism *Catch-22*. Doc Daneeka can ground combatant personnel only if they are crazy, but as long as they realize it is crazy to risk their lives flying countless missions, they manifest logical thinking, so they are sound, not crazy. They will have to keep on fighting:

“DOC DANEEKA (CONT'D): *Catch-22* specifies that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that are real and immediate is the process of a rational mind.” (Davies and Michôd, 2019, p. 50).

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### 8. Conclusions

*Catch-22* is a massive and eventful novel, consequently, the two scriptwriters, Luke Davies and David Michôd, had to find a wise way of extracting the most suggestive episodes in the novel for their script. On account of this, they selected those chapters representative for the absurd comic and, in counterpoint, gloomy scenes full of war atrocities and bad luck. Thus, the ludicrous and illogical episodes alternate with ominous ones. Owing to such an approach, the script avoids the verbose analyses in the novel, but it misses subtle points. However, the gains of the script are the exposure of war as preposterous and absurd machinery fueled by stupidity, mania, greed and cruelty. Accordingly, this is a script that relies not on experimental techniques, but on framing the two major narrative threads in the novel and displaying them in a montage which targets stark contrasts. The purpose of the part 1.1 of the script is to delineate a bizarre world supported by two pillars: the absurd and preposterous comic and the carnage implied by a war fought by exploited and misled soldiers.

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