

## Claude Chabrol's *Madame Bovary*: An Inflected Re-writing or a Textual Infidelity

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Adaptations are inter-textual narratives which give birth to innumerable possibilities in cinematic discourse. Though, it risks essentialism, adaptations are not necessarily a “copy” of its “parent” text. Nor, is it simply a “by-product” of the primary work. It can have its own identity. This paper studies Claude Chabrol's adaptation of a classic novel by Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, and tries to find the film's own identity in relation to the novel.

In 1856, a French writer, Gustave Flaubert, wrote a novel titled *Madame Bovary*. This classic novel has been interpreted and re-interpreted in various art forms, film adaptation being one such form of interpretation. Claude Chabrol (1930-2010), a French director adapted this novel into film in 1991. He belonged to the French new wave cinema movement, which started in France in the 1950s with directors such as Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. Though New wave cinema rejected adaptation of literary work into film, many directors of this period combined literature and cinema. As Robert Stam points out in his article titled “Adaptation and the French New Wave: A Study in Ambivalence” that “Chabrol's 1991 adaptation of *Madame Bovary*, in this sense, represents a kind of return to normalcy and a break with the formal audacity of the New Wave” (189).

In Chabrol's adaptation of *Madame Bovary*, Isabelle Huppert and Jean-François Balmer play the role of Madame and Monsieur Bovary respectively. This adaptation of *Madame Bovary* is so faithful to the original story that there is no mention of the film being “inspired by,” “suggested by” or “adapted from” the novel, but rather features the words “*Madame Bovary*de (of) *Gustave Flaubert*” in its opening sequence. Thus, within the two poles of film adaptation, where complete liberty is taken in the transposition of literature to screen on the one hand, and the film being “truly” adapted from the literary text on the other hand, Chabrol's *Madame Bovary* finds itself in the later position, alongside the “faithfuls” or “reproductions”. One can also say that this work is an example of transposition.

The three types of adaptation —transposition, commentary, and analogy — are identified by Geoffrey Wagner in relation to the overlapping

of a film adaptation to the source text (Donaldson-Evans 96). Transposition takes place when there is minimum interference in the process of transferring literary text from page to screen. Commentary alters, restructures and reconstructs the original. Analogy takes fiction as a mere point of departure and is not faithful to the original literary text .

*Madame Bovary* is the story of Emma and her life after becoming Madame Bovary, her boredom, her adultery and ultimately her death at the end. Flaubert divides his book into three parts. Part one is divided into nine chapters. Part two is divided into fifteen chapters, and part three is divided into eleven chapters.

Though the film ignores Emma's childhood and her husband Charles's journey towards becoming a doctor, it encompasses all the major events of the novel in chronological order. Right from the beginning, the film is the story of Emma. Unlike the novel, where the reader has to wait until the second chapter of the first part to be introduced to Emma, in the film audience gets a glimpse of Emma immediately. The film starts in the early morning, with Doctor Charles Bovary visiting Mr. Rouault at his distant farm to set a simple fracture. Emma is the patient's daughter, admired by Charles and whom he later marries. There is no mention of Heloise, Charles's first wife, and her death in the film. After Heloise's death, Charles and Emma must wait for the mourning period to pass. They spend time with each other to plan the wedding. At this point in the novel, one learns that Emma would like to have a midnight wedding. In the film, however, it is only during the wedding itself that Emma expresses this feeling conveying a sense of boredom to the audience.

### ***The Forgotten "Bovarys"***

For Claude Chabrol, *Madame Bovary* is merely the story of Madame Bovary herself, represented as a series of events in her life and her ultimate death. The fact that this novel is rich in visual descriptions does not mean that it is simply about descriptions. Madame Bovary is a *sentimental* character with a lot of nuances. Her character is not built in a vacuum; her void can be understood by understanding the limitations of her surroundings. It becomes therefore necessary to understand her world before understanding Emma and subsequently *Madame Bovary* as a novel. This part of our paper is going to discuss the other forgotten "Bovarys" in Claude Chabrol's 1991 representation of *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert's story begins with Charles at school at the age of fifteen. His father, having spent all of his wife's fortune, has become an ill-tempered and irritable man. It was Charles's mother who had taken care of the house and looked after

business matters. While as a child Charles was pampered by his mother and father, he never developed any bad habits. His mother always kept him near her and wanted him to have a successful career as an engineer, or in Law. It was only after his first communion, at the age of twelve, that he was admitted to school at Rouen, where he was a hard-working student. At the end of his third year, he was admitted to medical school. Here he initially fails, but after tireless hard work, he manages to pass his exams. His parents arrange a grand dinner to celebrate his success, and his mother then starts searching for a place where he could start his practice, and he is finally installed in Tostes. His mother then also looks for a wife for Charles and finds an ugly widow with a handsome income in the hope of making life easier for her son. Flaubert writes:

She found him one—the widow of a bailiff at Dieppe—who was forty-five and had an income of twelve hundred francs. Though she was ugly, as dry as a bone, her face with as many pimples as the spring has buds, Madame Dubuc had no lack of suitors. To attain her ends Madame Bovary had to oust them all, and she even succeeded in very cleverly baffling the intrigues of a port-butcher backed up by the priests (Kindle Locations 215-219).

Her name was Heloise. She was an unpleasant woman who sought to control Charles's life. One can see that Flaubert is creating a character, Charles, whose life is guided by his mother and his wife. He does not have any judgment of his own, and it seems that he does not feel strongly about anything in life. He does not seem to clearly know what he wants from life, which leads him to easily submit to decisions made by others. In Charles's case, his life decisions are mostly made by strong female characters. Later, he meets and marries Emma, who is a strong character herself, able to take care of the house when her father breaks a leg and he is not able to move from his bed.

The film does not give any insight into Charles Bovary's unsentimental character, which is the cause of Emma's tension after her marriage to him. His voice, his body language, and his shy mannerisms only tell us that he is a timid person. One example of Chabrol's representation of Charles's shyness is shown in the scene where, when he is about to leave after treating Emma's father, she asks him his name, and he answers her with a low voice that his name is "Charbovary." He is barely able to look directly into Emma's eyes. A screenshot of this moment is below.



(*Madame Bovary*, Claude Chabrol)

As one can see, Charles Bovary is about to enter his carriage and is very hesitant in replying to Emma. Chabrol also shows a lack of interest in him for knowing Emma. The reason for Emma's anguish, after becoming Madame Bovary, lies within Charles. Ignoring Charles's character means losing the main plot, that is, the depth of Emma's anguish which is the essence of *Madame Bovary*.

On the other hand, the two shots used to introduce Emma to the audience are not sufficient to present Emma's character in its entirety. In the first shot, which is a close-up of her, the audience gets to see Emma. Here, she is shown as a somber character with a faint smile. This picture does not give the audience any clue as to the enthusiastic side to Emma's character.



(*Madame Bovary*, Claude Chabrol)

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The second shot which aims to describe Emma's character to the audience does not succeed in presenting the "emotional" Emma, telling us only about her artistic inclinations and her desire to live in a town. Again, Emma's gestures and voice do not effectively portray Flaubert's Emma. The expressions of Flaubert's Emma are more complex, her voice modulations change as she manifests her joy and boredom. At one moment her "big naïve eyes" are open and immediately after her eyelids are half closed. Flaubert depicts the complex emotions of Emma in the following words:

And, according to what she was saying, her voice was clear, sharp, or, on a sudden all languor, drawn out in modulations that ended almost in murmurs as she spoke to herself, now joyous, opening big naïve eyes, then with her eyelids half closed, her look full of boredom, her thoughts wandering. (Flaubert, *Kindle Locations 412-414*).

In this scene in the film, Emma is describing her passion for music, the prizes she won at the convent, her mother, and how she would like to live in a town. In the same scene, Charles is paying very little attention to what she is saying as he is looking at her beauty and is busy making plans to marry her. The two characters are on two completely different levels of thought. Though the mismatch between these two characters can be seen in this scene, it fails to define their contrasting characters to the audience. The audience, even after this scene, remains unaware of these two characters' personalities and thus falls prey to simplistic binary divisions, such as:

- a . Emma is beautiful/ Charles is not very good-looking
- b . Emma is bold/ Charles is shy
- c . Emma likes art/ Charles does not like art

These binary divisions in the audience's mind lead to a further misunderstanding of Emma's character. It becomes easy to draw the simplistic conclusion that Emma does not like Charles simply because he does not possess the above qualities, rather than because of their difference in temperament.



Again, her entire romantic character is condensed in her monologue about how she would have liked a midnight wedding.

### **The “Uneasiness” of Madame Bovary**

The lines below from chapter six, part one of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, make it very clear that Emma has nothing in common with Charles Bovary. She is already “bored” by the calm countryside life he offers, and all she wants is a life of excitement. The sea excites because of its storms. The green fields attract her only when they are broken by ruins. She is not looking for landscapes, but for the ability to create emotion in her heart. It is important to note here that the sea, which Flaubert writes about, is mostly absent in Chabrol’s work:

Accustomed to calm aspects of life, she turned, on the contrary, to those of excitement. She loved the sea only for the sake of its storms, and the green fields only when broken up by ruins. She wanted to get some personal profit out of things, and she rejected as useless all that did not contribute to the immediate desires of her heart, being of a temperament more sentimental than artistic, looking for emotions, not landscapes. (630-634)

Emma does not like mediocrity in sentiments. When her mother dies, she writes a letter full of her melancholic reflections on life to her father, who immediately goes to see her thinking that she is sick. She appreciates the fact that she can move her father and enjoys her success in reaching idealism in a pale life. Flaubert describes Emma’s self-appeasement, even in

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moments of sorrow, in these words:

The goodman [Mr. Roualt, Emma's father] thought she must be ill and came to see her. Emma was secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of pale lives, never attained by mediocre hearts. (670-671)

Flaubert creates the *uneasiness* which falls upon Emma's life after her marriage with these words.

As their life together became more intimate, a growing detachment distanced her from him. Charles's conversation was as flat as a pavement. His borrowed ideas trudged past in colourless procession without emotion, laughter or dreams. (145)

Chabrol uses the exact words as a background narration to portray Madame Bovary's *uneasiness* after her marriage. While the narrator speaks in the background, one sees Charles and Emma having dinner together and having a trivial conversation about the weather. Emma's facial expression and her monotonous voice clearly express her total lack of interest. Through his use of background narration, Chabrol tries to compensate for the visual limitations he encounters in trying to capture Emma's inner unease on screen.



(*Madame Bovary*, Claude Chabrol)

This scene is insufficient in translating Emma's desperate attempt to express herself and Charles's emotional absence in her life brought about by his inability to understand her. The scene also fails to capture Emma's desire to include her husband in her sentimental life. Charles, on the other hand,

could never guess his wife's "undefinable uneasiness, variable as the clouds, unstable as the winds". She expects passion and refinement from him, but all of Charles's conversations fail to evoke any "emotion, laughter or thought" in Emma, nor does he have any curiosity in art. (700)

In the book, Emma expresses her dissatisfaction with regards to Charles's calm ease with the following words:

A man, on the contrary, should he not know everything, excel in manifold activities, initiate you into the energies of passion, the refinements of life, all mysteries? But this one taught nothing, knew nothing, wished nothing. He thought her happy; and she resented this easy calm, this serene heaviness, the very happiness she gave him. (708-710)

Chabrol fails to present the silence in Emma's life, her silent anguish, and to portray Charles's happiness at having a wife like Emma. He takes pride in Emma's artistic skills and, unlike Emma, is never short of words to share his daily routine at dinner time. Also, Chabrol completely ignores the tension between Charles's mother, Madame Dubuc, and Emma. Again, this tension between the two women highlights his indecisive nature whereby he is not sure whom to support and whom to criticize. Flaubert explains Charles's dilemma in front of her mother and his wife in these words:

Charles knew not what to answer: he respected his mother, and he loved his wife infinitely; he considered the judgment of the one infallible, and yet he thought the conduct of the other irreproachable. (741-742).

Finally, Emma accepts the fact that Charles's expression of passion is inhibited. Even his expression of love can be easily predicted:

His outbursts became regular; he embraced her at certain fixed times. It was one habit among other habits, and, like a dessert, looked forward to after the monotony of dinner. (749-751)

### **"Why did I Marry?"**

This part of our paper is going to take Chabrol's representation of Emma's question "why did I marry?"

Unlike Flaubert, Chabrol does not make a clear distinction between Emma's uneasiness and her "ennui," which overlap in Chabrol's work. Chabrol's Emma quickly reaches a stage of boredom, whereas Flaubert's Emma passes through the phase of uneasiness and then reaches the stage of boredom. As opposed to Chabrol's Emma, Flaubert's asks the question "why did I marry?" after many attempts to adjust to life with Charles. She

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thinks about changes which she wants to bring about in the house; she has new wallpaper put up and repaints the staircase. She wants to fall in love with Charles, but all her attempts to make Charles more amorous fail. She is as vulnerable as the sea, and he is as calm as land (or island) without any sign of “movement.”

This is the first scene after Emma’s marriage where she steps outside the house to say goodbye to Charles and is very disappointed not to see anything exciting in her surroundings.



*(Madame Bovary, Claude Chabrol)*

This is the second scene where she goes inside and becomes absorbed in the music.



*(Madame Bovary, Claude Chabrol)*

This is the scene where she tries to pass the time walking.



*(Madame Bovary, Claude Chabrol)*

Very soon, she starts questioning why she got married.



Flaubert's Emma is not that impatient. She manages her house and makes food for her neighbours. She spends hours alone, walking with her Italian greyhound. She goes to the beeches of Bannerville. She looks around but cannot see any change and then she asks the question "Good heavens! Why did I marry?" and imagines the life she would have led if she had a different husband, someone "handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive" (763).

She often imagines the life of her companions at the convent.

In town, with the noise of the streets, the buzz of the theatres and the lights of the ballroom, they were living lives where the heart expands, the senses burgeon out. (764-765)

Returning to her life, she finds herself trapped in the web of *ennui* which was “weaving in the darkness in every corner of her heart”. The *ennui*, the “silent spider” (765-767) in Emma’s life is almost blurred in Chabrol’s work. Also, her comparison to her dog Djali and her conversation.

### **Conclusion**

Chabrol simplifies and summarises *Madame Bovary*, not only the novel but also the character of Emma herself. This adaptation of *Madame Bovary* fails to tell us that Emma is the victim of marriage with an unsuitable man, a story of mismatching. Madame Bovary is criticized, as the reader does not want to believe the words of a woman. The representation of Madame Bovary’s boredom after her marriage becomes the tale of a married woman’s woes and her adultery. She is the victim of a father who loves to spend money on a “good life” rather than saving for a good dowry for his daughter. Old Rouault, her father, wants to get rid of his daughter, who “was of no use to him in the house” and he immediately seizes the opportunity to marry her off to Charles, without respecting her wishes.

Adapting *Madame Bovary* is a difficult task as, an adaptation, as pointed out by André Bazin, in his famous work titled *What is Cinema?* “derives from a form of literature so highly developed that the heroes and the meaning of their actions depend very closely on the style of the author, when they are intimately wrapped up with it as in a microcosm, the laws of which, in themselves rigorously determined, have no validity outside that world (...)” (54).

As quoted in the book *French film directors: Claude Chabrol* Hupert says that “C’est de cela que meurt Madame Bovary: de ne pas avoir été reconnue comme une personne désirante” (That’s what Madame Bovary dies of – not being recognised as a person with desires” (Austin 145).

Should one really criticize the adaptation of *Madame Bovary* for its inability to capture Emma’s “pain”. After all, according to Bazin, “the accelerated evolution (of cinema) is in no sense contemporary with that of the other arts. The cinema is young, but literature, theatre, and music are as old as history” (55).

On the question of adaptation being inferior to novels André Bazin insists that “the fact that the cinema appeared after the novel and the theatre

does not mean that it fails into line behind them and on the same plane” (57). While pointing out the difference between the film and the novel, one should take into account, as Robert Stam mentions in the chapter “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation” in the book titled *Film Adaptation* edited by James Naremore, that one sees the difference in adaptation from the novel because there is a change of medium. As Stam explains subsequently, novel has words and a film has images and sounds. For example, when in *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert details the physical characteristics of Emma, it leads to various imaginative constructions in reader’s mind. On the contrary, a film, must narrow down to a specific performer, for example, Isabelle Hubert, who is “real” and “concrete”. Thus, by making a choice of characters, by omitting certain aspects of Emma and by giving more emphasis on her life rather than other characters in the novel, Chabrol makes the choice to re-write the novel in his own way. This act of re-writing gives a distinct identity to this adaptation of *Madame Bovary*. In the end we can say that, Chabrol’s *Madame Bovary* is original because of its *infidelity* to the original text.

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