

Intermediality, Translation, Comparative Literature, and World Literature

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Recommended Citation

Schlumpf, Erin. "Intermediality, Translation, Comparative Literature, and World Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1814>>

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Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 5
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/5>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,
Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>>

Abstract: In her article "Intermediality, Translation, Comparative Literature, and World Literature" Erin Schlumpf postulates that the study of literature today is best performed in a framework of comparative literature and world literature including intermediality particularly in the case of translated texts. Schlumpf contends that working in comparative and world literature today demands a reexamination of translation and the teaching of works in translation. Following her theoretical postulates, Schlumpf analyzes two films, Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1966) and Xiaolu Guo's *She, a Chinese (Zhongguo guniang)* (2009).

Erin SCHLUMPF

Intermediality, Translation, Comparative Literature, and World Literature

One of the distinctive features of the discipline of comparative literature since its inception in the nineteenth century has been the field of translation and the standard notion that a discussion and analysis of a translated text should also involve the original. And this holds equally with regard to major world languages such as Chinese, as well as "minor" languages such as Romanian or Hungarian. Literatures in less-studied languages should not be passed over simply because scholars lack the knowledge of and fluency in such languages. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, "the task of translation in the global context should be thought in this frame, where the learning of languages is the first imperative — the production of translation an activism — and not simply a giving in to the demand for convenience in a country where multiculturalism goes hand in hand with monolingualism" ("Translating" 38). With regard to translation proper, Lawrence Venuti claims that translation can enrich the study of literature: "translation broadens the range of questions that students might ask of languages, texts, traditions, and cultures as well as of the relations among them" (87).

Perhaps because of comparative literature's national orientation and Eurocentrism (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek), in the last ten years, many departments of comparative literature are revisiting the concept of "world literature." One of the ways in which David Damrosch defines this emerging field of study is as follows: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language ... My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading" (5). In framing the above suggested parameters — from comparative literature to world literature and translation and to what has become evident in the digital age with regard to the study of literature and culture (on this, see, e.g., López-Varela and Tötösy de Zepetnek; Wolf) — I postulate that when working with the original text is not possible, working with translations requires an intermedial mode of inquiry. If world literature is the future of comparative literature, I believe it is because its reach is wider and its framework ought to include intermediality.

Following the 2011 inauguration of the Peking University Institute for World Literature I attended a seminar at the Institute in which we were asked to examine ancient Egyptian poems, fragments by Sappho, and the Song of Solomon. In the seminar we discussed three "texts" whose original media varied wildly: ancient graffiti, buried notes, and an erotic poem. However, the seminar did not speak to the distinctive media of each; instead, we were asked whether all three texts were love poetry and, as a scholar of modernity, I felt unprepared to tackle such a query. To my mind, the seminar lacked the aspect and perspective of intermediality I believe to be necessary for solid work in comparative literature. The seminar was designed to ignore the languages and media in which they were originally created and to assess them according to some vague contemporary notion of "love poetry," a genre which the seminar made no attempt to explicate or to theorize. Locating and assessing perspectives of these kinds always necessitates an intermedial approach, whether the media include literature, cinema, criticism, history, and/or language. For, even a written, critical response to film translates that work's material into a printed one: both the form and content are altered — although hopefully not distorted — by such an act, as are all works by every act of translation. However, does the reverse also hold? Does intermediality apply to the translation and negotiation between works in different languages from and to different cultures? Is comparative work necessarily intermedial? If intermediality is a mode thus an ability to decode different kinds of signs in order to string together an argument, then comparative work does, indeed, demand the same mode. Spivak urges that comparative literature pay careful attention to how translation is practiced: "Comparative Literature, then, begins to insist on the irreducibility of idiom, even as it insists on translation as commonly understood. When we rethink comparativism, we think translation as an active rather than prosthetic practice" (Spivak, "Comparativism" 613) and "the idea of the untranslatable as not something that one cannot translate but something one never stops (not) translating" ("Translating" 39). The translator does not simply replace missing parts (gaps in understanding), but must reconsider continually the foreign text as a whole and must inhabit — paradoxically — the foreign text from the outside. The task of working in more than one language requires not just coming to an understanding of meaning across signs, but also withholding from collapsing these meanings into the perversion of a false sameness. This requires the same mode as someone working with a book and its filmic adaptation. While the narrative may be essentially identical, the two media, the two aesthetic experiences make it impossible to allow the verdict that the book and film "are the same." Neither is Proust in French and in English. The im-

portance of navigating these differences increases when looking at adaptations across languages and cultures, like Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Aimée Césaire's *Une tempête*, or "love poetry" in Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Greek.

In the following I illustrate my postulate with the intermedial analysis of two films, Godard's *La Chinoise* and Guo's *She, a Chinese (Zhongguo guniang)*. In *La Chinoise* Godard tells the story of a Maoist cell in Paris before the 1968 events, that of five self-appointed citizen soldiers of a revolution yet-to-come. Over forty years later, Xiaolu Guo offers a response to Godard with her 2009 film, *She, a Chinese*: "It's in some ways the Chinese version of *La Chinoise*. A version going in the reverse direction, since my Chinese woman journeys from East to West. It is a slightly cynical reference to Godard as his Chinese woman no longer exists" ("Eh bien, voilà en quelque sorte la version chinoise de *La Chinoise*. Une version totalement à l'envers, puisque ma Chinoise à moi fait le voyage inverses, et va vers l'Ouest. C'est une référence un peu cynique à Godard, puisque sa Chinoise à lui n'existe plus, aujourd'hui" [Guo qtd. in Crousse <http://archives.lesoir.be/cinema-une-cineaste-«-bohemienne-»-au-festival-de-gand_t-20091015-00QDNX.html?query=guo&firstHit=0&by=10&sort=datedesc&when=-1&queryor=guo&pos=0&all=252&nav=1>]). Guo's film also takes revolution as its subject, following the personal revolt of one young Chinese peasant against the restrictions imposed on her as a result of her ethnicity, class, and gender. Unlike Godard's characters, Guo's protagonist does not consider herself to be fighting for a larger cause. It is the specific historical circumstances that lead to Godard's film; Guo's film can be understood as a contemporary historical response; and comparative intermediality can be applied to understand and view the two films. Although Godard's *La Chinoise* appears to be a film devoted to the theme of militant youth, I believe that its final verdict on this subject is ambiguous and that Guo's *She, a Chinese* has a more explicit political message. Ironically, even as Godard's characters shout Mao Zedong's aphorisms with zeal, it is Guo's protagonist who makes the braver choices. And, while Godard's characters share meals over impassioned discussion from the comfort of a Parisian apartment, for Guo's protagonist revolution does not happen without sacrifice. This paper will go on to discuss how each film emerges from national history as well as from the personal trajectory of these two *auteurs*, before returning to the question of translation, intermediality, and literary studies.

As I suggest above, we ought to consider these films as "translations." Godard translates the political enthusiasm of intellectual youth in 1967 Paris into the medium of fiction film, a work that predicts the collapse of the May 1968 revolution. Guo translates Godard, not only from French into Chinese and English, but also from his perspective into her own. Thus we are confronted with the question, for example, of how could the concept of a "Chinese woman" mean the same thing across languages, cultures, and historical periods? When Godard titles his film *La Chinoise*, he speaks about one iteration of a cultural-linguistic-gender translation, one interpretation of what it might mean to be a Chinese woman. When Guo responds with her film, *She, a Chinese*, she gives another interpretation by translating Godard's work into a story by a female Chinese artist about a contemporary, female, Chinese subject. When the scholar confronts both of these works, it is not in order to declare "who has it right" or which Chinese woman is more "authentic." This is where comparative work requires a special attention to intermediality. Godard's *La Chinoise*, even as the translation of its title into Chinese has been rendered as *Zhongguo guniang*, the same Chinese title that Guo chose for her film, has nothing to do with the female Chinese protagonist in Guo's film. What Godard refers to in *La Chinoise* cannot be understood without attention to his film's historical moment, particularly French circumstances and Godard's personal views. Guo's film, likewise, stems from her Chinese background and cosmopolitan existence, but the international forces of globalization also make her work a substantially different venture than that of Godard.

Godard's *La Chinoise* was released the summer before the tumultuous spring of 1968. But how do we define May 1968? Kristin Ross writes that the event has been generally summarized (perhaps over-simplified) in the following terms: "'May' begins on May 3, when the forces of order are called into the Sorbonne, initiating student arrests that in turn provoke violent popular demonstrations during the weeks that follow in the streets of the Latin Quarter. 'May' ends on May 30, when de Gaulle makes a speech in which he announces he will not step down from the presidency, threatens army intervention, and dissolves the National Assembly" (8). May 1968 denotes the point during *Les Trente glorieuses* — 1945-1975, the thirty-year period of economic expansion and prosperity in France following the World War II — when workers and students joined forces to express their recognition for the unfair distribution of wealth in France and their dissatisfaction with de Gaulle's government. Godard's biographer, Antoine de Baecque, asserts that the commonly held belief that the 1967 *La*

Chinoise announces the 1968 revolution is a misunderstanding, because "the film announces less the hope for change and the student revolt" that characterized May '68, "than the disillusionment that follows every frenzied engagement" (380). While I agree that *La Chinoise* can be read as an illustration of the blazing and extinguishing fires of political conviction, it is not irrelevant that the film was made in the wake of May 1968. The characters in the film explore ideas that enjoyed great popularity during that period and thus *La Chinoise* must be acknowledged as at least symptomatic of the coming revolution. Godard himself was experimenting with leftist politics during the late 1960s, and would call himself a Maoist by 1968. He was also on the brink of forming the socialist-idealist Dziga-Vertov cinema group, which marked a radical break from his first New Wave films and solidified his commitment to explicitly political cinema. *La Chinoise* reveals Godard's personal revolt, as well as that of the students and workers of 1968.

In *La Chinoise* there is the statement that — written large in black on the wall of a bourgeois apartment in Paris's posh seventh arrondissement — "one must confront vague ideas with clear images" ("Il faut confronter des idées vagues avec des images claires" [unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine]). One early shot shows, on the left, Godard's young second wife, Anne Wiazemsky, incarnating the philosophy student Véronique, in the center we see Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud, whose career began at the tender age of fourteen in Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* and whom Godard employed in many projects thereafter) a young actor inspired by Brecht's epic and political theater, and on the right we see Yvonne (Juliet Berto, who had a brief appearance in Godard's 1966 *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*), a country girl who arrived in Paris only several years earlier and who now works as a maid and occasional prostitute. We have, therefore, a composition of a would-be philosopher, a political artist, and a hooker, an ensemble whose significance lies in the fact that this work, Godard's fourteenth feature-length film, must be understood as another episode in the chronicle of history, personal and universal, Godard undertakes in his filmic essays. As we see repeatedly in intertitles throughout *La Chinoise*, it is a "film in the process of being made" ("un film en train de se faire"). The film does not aspire to offer a final say on art or politics but represents a further step in Godard's long march as an *auteur* in a new direction. The title seems to refer especially to the character of Véronique, who seeks to change the world through Maoism (and terrorism). This reference is also enhanced by colors: white walls, red curtains, and a mountain of *Little Red Books* (it is said that more than 600 were purchased for the film, blue Chinese workers' uniforms on the young women, and a blue shirt on Guillaume [Baecque, 358]). This confirms that in the mid- to late-1960s Godard explored what it meant to be French (note that the three colors are those of the French flag) at a time of intense consumerism, industrialization, and especially US-Americanization (the French and US-American flag, of course, share the same colors). Although Godard's ambivalent relationship with the inundation of US-American culture in France following World War II is treated as early as in his 1959-60 film *A bout de souffle*, he continues the more particular referencing via color introduced in the 1966 films *Made in USA* and *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*. However, the predominance of red in *La Chinoise* carries, of course, another significance in that this film treats a band of young "reds," French youth devoted to Maoism and other brands of radical socialism. The other prominent color in the film is yellow, which Jacques Rancière has explained as a reference to the yellow skin of the Chinese and that "counter ... the degradation of nuance and the confusion of reality" (193). In other words, these primary colors provide the "clear images" we see written on the wall of the apartment. However, all of these images appear too clear and exaggerated. Why own so many *Little Red Books* when they all contain the same aphorisms? Why go so far as to don the garb of Chinese workers? I postulate that Godard investigates this extremism ironically, but not cruelly. At the end of the summer, the Maoist cell disbands and Véronique returns to university, Guillaume sets out on his own to change the world through theatre: these self-proclaimed citizen soldiers of a revolution that would not gain real momentum in France until 1968 are treated with humor and compassion and not stripped of their dignity.

As to the historical background of the film while its title may refer to Véronique, it also seeks to draw a connection to all Chinese women of the late 1960s, when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Wenhua da geming*) called for every member of society to participate in the overhaul of traditional thinking: "in the course of revolutionary struggle, it was believed, the masses would spiritually transform themselves while transforming the objective world in which they lived. What Mao called for was no less than a 'profound' revolution 'that touches people to their very souls'" (Meisner 312). By 2009, when Guo's film appeared in cinemas, Chinese women and men no longer believed in this kind of revolution and thus Godard's Chinese woman no longer existed. The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre marked the end of what has been called the "New Era" (*xinshiqi*). Defined by the absence of

Mao, the opening up of China to the rest of the world and the students' and intellectuals' dream of more freedom, the New Era came to a halt with the military crackdown. The "Post-New Era" (*hou xin shiqi*) has since emerged and with it a new national vision. Since the 1990s, China has been consistently urbanizing, industrializing and globalizing. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping took a tour of China's southern cities in order to promote his crusade for economic openness and expansion. Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu highlights this campaign as another watershed event for China as it approached the end of the twentieth century: "The 'socialist market economy,' a euphemism for capitalist economy, was legitimized as an official principle at the Party Congress. After nearly three years of wavering and uncertainty, the Chinese economy gathered momentum again and grew at an astonishing rate. Therefore, there may be two turning points here: 1989 for intellectuals, who, in their disillusionment, turn to a search for material success and celebrity status; and 1992, the opening of an era that provided the conditions that made such 'success' possible" (140-41). One of the hallmarks, then, of China since the mid-1990s up to the Post-New Era is astounding economic growth. The Chinese have charged onto the world market, seizing the opportunity to end their decades of poverty. With economic growth has come a complementary passion for consumption.

Guo's life and work in some ways parallels developments in recent Chinese history with the added dimension of a cosmopolitan existence, similar to the Nobel Prize Winner Xingjian Gao (see, e.g., Lee <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/4/>>). Briefly, Guo grew up in southern China and attended the Beijing Film Academy, before relocating to London in 2002. Among her English-language works is her *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), her first novel written in English. She published previously five other works, but all of these had been written first in Chinese, although in several cases Guo translated her work to English. With regard to her identity, Guo explains it by using two objecta, her Chinese government identity card and a foreign map: "'Identity,' most of the time, is something that exists but isn't chosen. And one has to accept it or else lose one's social position. I, too, have a noble piece of plastic — it says: Chinese, Hui Minority, Peasant Household ... So here I am in decayed Europe, looking at the map of China. A map of China with English letters. That is confusing — when you read your own country's map in a foreign language, you are not sure any more where those places are supposed to be. I don't really find the China with its cities and towns, all I see are those borders ... And on that map I'm still trying to find out why I am a Hui and why a peasant and why I am a Chinese" (Anonymous <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/writer-xiaolu-guo-fragments-of-my-life-823519.html?r=RSS>>). Although she still possesses a Chinese identity card, Guo has become a permanent citizen of the world dividing her time between Europe and China and working in a variety of languages and thus identity politics and aspects of identity formation stand out as a central theme in both her written and filmic work. For Guo, the individual no longer needs to belong to one nation, and yet, this nation and its language remain inescapable markers of self.

In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* Guo takes up these issues telling the story of a young Chinese woman, Zhuang Xiaoqiao, known to her new Anglophone acquaintances as "Z," who comes to London to study English and ends up falling in love. The novel, written to resemble diary entries, structured by months over the course of one year and each headed by English words and their definitions, charts Z's range of experiences as a foreigner and a woman in love. The first entry for the month of February, Z's first month in London, begins with a word pertinent to Z's new circumstances: "alien *adj* foreign; repugnant (to); from another world *n* foreigner; being from another world" (9). The novel also plots Z's growing knowledge of English. An early entry reads, "Windy and chilly. I feeling I can die for all kinds of situation in every second. No safety in this country, I think unsafe feeling come from I knowing nothing about this country. I scared I in big danger" (13). By the end of the year, Z's English has improved dramatically: "I think of those days when I traveled in Europe on my own. I met many people and finally I wasn't so afraid of being alone. Maybe I should let my life open, like a flower; maybe I should fly, like a lonely bird" (325). However, Z's sentimental education is no less dramatic. Beginning the story as a long woman who does not know what she wants or who she is in the world, Z grows up over the course of her year in England.

Since Guo uses the English language as an aesthetic and structural device in Z's coming of age narrative, it would have been impossible to write the same story in Chinese. Nonetheless, has Guo, by switching to English, either turned her back on her mother tongue or given herself over to the higher market value of literature in English? In "The Language of Betrayal" Jin Ha gives a more general response to this question, using his own choice of writing in English, as well as that of Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov to structure his argument: "the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language ... Historically, it has always been the individual who is accused of betraying his country. Why shouldn't we turn the tables by accusing a country of betraying the individual? Most countries

have been such habitual traitors to their citizens anyway. The worst crime the country commits against the writer is to make him unable to write with honesty and artistic integrity" (31-32). Jin refers obliquely in this passage to the restrictive censorship laws imposed on writers in Mainland China. According to Jin, China can no longer claim "betrayal" after having expressly repressed the voices of its people. As a result, Jin immigrated to the United States and writes in English. He believes a writer working in a new language "must do everything to find his place in his adopted language, including cracking jokes that are not translatable for his native people. In such a case, he may have to sacrifice his mother tongue, while borrowing its strength and resources, in order to accomplish a style in his adopted tongue. In short, he must be loyal only to his art" (59-60). Guo has claimed that her decision to write in English was made as a result of her real life circumstances: a young Chinese woman living in London and trying to gain proficiency in the language of the place. However, Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* differs from Jin's works in that Guo's novel is written between Chinese and English. The tale begins in broken English and even as Z improves her language skills she refers to Chinese sayings and includes occasionally diary entries written in Chinese. At the end of the section devoted to August, Z begins her entry in Chinese (196) and the text remains untranslated on the page (with the editor's translation later), thus allowing readers of Chinese access to Z's truly bilingual story. However, for readers who are unable to read Chinese, this gesture highlights the difficulty that Z must encounter when writing in English and the difficulty of existing between languages. While most of the novel is in English, the text never gains freedom from Chinese. This seems to be the fate the any person who chooses (or is forced) to live elsewhere. Guo's novel shows the struggle of a Chinese immigrant, but displaced people everywhere have similar stories of living between languages and cultures. Her tale is a Chinese one, but also a worldly one: nations grow less and less uniform, cultures blend, and languages evolve.

Guo's *She, a Chinese* tells the story of a young woman's journey west, a variation on the plot of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. The film follows the trajectory of Li Mei (Huang Lu), a daughter of the generation of the Cultural Revolution, but a young woman with the passions of her Post-New Era young adulthood. She does not care about politics, she listens to pop music, and yearns to have enough money to travel, and to live as she likes. Born in a village, the victim of poverty and sexual violence, she flees to the booming city of Chongqin and later to London. In Chongqin, Mei works as a prostitute and takes to wearing a wig on occasion. Mei stays in the city only several months, falls for one of her clients, a hit man named Spiky. After Spiky is killed, Mei finds a large quantity of cash hidden under his mattress and uses it to take a trip with a tour group to Europe. In London, she flees the tour, works various odd jobs under the table before marrying an Englishman who is old enough to be her grandfather. She flees, again, this new marriage of convenience and takes up with another man, Rashid, by whom she is impregnated. Mei leaves Rashid when it becomes clear that he will never marry a non-Muslim and the last shots of the film reveal the heavily pregnant Mei walking along the side of the highway. This retelling may give the impression that this story is a tragedy, but I argue that such is not the case. Mei insists stubbornly on a life suited to her own desires. She is young, vain (there are many sequences in the film in which Mei examines herself in mirrors), self-centered (she shows no remorse in leaving her parents without a word, she treats her elderly English husband with scorn and disgust), and is entirely uninterested in engaging politically. These descriptors should not be taken as harsh judgments of Mei's moral fiber: she is a young woman trying to shape her destiny on her own terms. In an early sequence in the film she gazes out of the car window; Mei's gaze is turned always towards what is to come. In this sense she is a profound optimist. In one sequence of shots she wears a blue wig revealing that she does not feel the need to conform to some model of the young, Chinese peasant.

Mei's revolt, a dogged determination to flee her limited surroundings and to live as a liberated woman comes at a higher cost than that of Godard's subjects, but is also more courageous, more dramatic. Her story is that of an ordinary Chinese girl of the contemporary moment to which the idea of a militant, soldier citizen is an irrelevant concept, barely a tired memory from the vaults of a trying national history. Her *Nouvelle Vague* "predecessor" would not be the citizen soldiers in Godard's *La Chinoise* but the young Antoine (Jean-Pierre Léaud) in François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* who longs to live independently. At the end of Truffaut's film Antoine flees the juvenile detention center where he has been sentenced after being charged with a petty theft crime, runs through the forest, and finally reaches the sea. Mei's escapes recall Antoine's escapes in a similar thematic construction. Of course, Mei longs to distance herself from her isolated village origins and the lack of possibilities these allow her. She wants to leave her country, seeing in London a place where she can have opportunities and

adventures while Antoine does not have the same set of circumstances, but essentially both films tell of youth trying to grow up without limitations.

Feminism may be a salient perspective that further differentiates the politics of *La Chinoise* from *She, a Chinese*. In her preface to Raymond Delambre's book on Chinese cinema, Guo quotes Simone de Beauvoir: "'Speaking brutally, class struggles have done nothing for the liberation of women... We still have a very long way to go before we obtain our true liberation' ... In a similar vein, it would perhaps be accurate to say that women's liberation is the longest, most prolonged struggle in human history" ("Dans une veine similaire, il serait peut-être juste de dire que la 'révolution des femmes' est la révolution la plus longue, prolongée dans l'histoire humaine" [Guo, "Préface" 23]). Guo's young female character in *She, a Chinese* is not only a contemporary Chinese, but also a contemporary Chinese woman. Guo's film shows a woman trying to be a person on her own terms, in a world in which soldier citizens have been replaced by imperfect, wandering individualists. Guo's engagement in their struggle for equality and freedom has none of the irony of Godard's film. For Guo, the battle is slow, painful, personal, and daily.

In conclusion, an intermedial reading of Godard's *La Chinoise* and Guo's *She, a Chinese* thus provides the necessary framework to understand the films as a conversation across time and cultures. Godard captures the enthusiasm for Maoist teachings that characterized many revolutionary Parisian youth in 1967 and Guo shows how irrelevant these teachings have become to the youthful rebellion of a Chinese girl in 2009. The dialogue between Godard and Guo only gains interest with careful attention to histories (personal, national, and global), texts (literary and filmic), and languages (French, Chinese, English, and broken English). Such an intermedial mode of analysis should be applied in all discussions involving comparative literature and world literature, especially those involving translation and translated texts. We must resist sweeping less-studied languages out of sight with convenient translations, for this gesture erases the complexity that makes literary studies significant.

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