

Trinh Van Dinh, Le Thi Tuan

F. Dostoevsky's Literary Works in the Contemporary Vietnamese Movie: Inter-Semiotic and Inter-Cultural Travels¹

Abstract. This article examines Le Van Kiet's 2014 film *Dịu dàng* (Gentle) as an instance of inter-semiotic and cross-cultural adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *A Gentle Creature*. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of inter-semiotic translation and cross-cultural criticism, the article argues that the film reinterprets Dostoevsky's characteristic existentialism and profound psychological conflict by transposing them into the context of post-colonial, post-Đổi Mới (Renovation) Vietnam, employing a naturalistic aesthetic and deliberate cultural localization strategies. In an era of global cultural convergence, the film emerges as an intertextual practice, where Vietnamese cinema engages in a profound dialogue with the global literary canon by redefining its socio-cultural coordinates. This process, in turn, forges new pathways for reimagining Vietnamese identity and its people in the contemporary era.

Keywords: inter-semiotic translation, cross-cultural, F. Dostoevsky, Vietnamese cinema, cultural localization.

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Чинь Ван Динь, Ле Тхи Туан

Литературное творчество Ф. Достоевского в современном вьетнамском кино: межсемиотические и межкультурные путешествия¹

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается фильм Ле Ван Киета 2014 года «Кроткая» («Dịu dàng») как пример интерсемиотической и кросс-культурной адаптации повести Ф.М. Достоевского «Кроткая». Автор, опираясь на теоретические основы интерсемиотического перевода и кросс-культурной критики, в статье утверждает, что фильм переосмысливает характерный для Достоевского экзистенциализм и глубокий психологический конфликт, перенося их в контекст постколониального времени, периода «Дой мой» (Обновления) Вьетнама, используя натуралистическую эстетику и стратегии целенаправленной культурной локализации. В эпоху глобальной культурной конвергенции кинематограф предстаёт как интертекстуальная практика, в рамках которой вьетнамское кино вступает в глубокий диалог с мировым литературным каноном, переосмысливая его социокультурные координаты. Этот процесс, в свою очередь, прокладывает новые пути для переосмысления идентичности вьетнамского народа в современную эпоху.

Ключевые слова: интерсемиотический перевод, кросс-культурная адаптация, Ф. Достоевский, вьетнамское кино, культурная локализация.

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Introduction

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a towering figure in both Russian and global literature. Beyond embodying the spirit of nineteenth-century Russian existentialism, he has become a transcultural symbol whose works transcend geopolitical and aesthetic boundaries and continue to resonate powerfully within the global artistic imagination. Much like William Shakespeare, Dostoevsky's works have become a fertile source of inspiration for numerous art forms, particularly cinema. These cinematic adaptations now constitute a genre in their own right. According to statistics compiled by Vanes Naldi [Naldi 2017: 3.01.2025], by 2017, cinema had recorded 124 films adapted from Dostoevsky's works, including both modern Western films and deeply localized Asian films. This proliferation attests to the fact that Dostoevsky's literary legacy functions as a global cultural code, capable of being reinterpreted, transformed, and engaged with in diverse social and artistic contexts. In 2014, in the landscape of Vietnamese cinema, director Lê Văn Kiết adapted Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Creature* (*Krotkaya*) into the film *Dịu dàng* (*Gentle*). Lê

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Văn Kiệt, a Vietnamese-American filmmaker known for his experimental approach and for localizing literary classics, crafted a work that blends psychological nuance with cultural specificity. Premiered at the 2014 Busan International Film Festival, *Dịu dàng* received critical acclaim for its refined cinematic language, psychological depth, and evocative integration of indigenous cultural elements.

Vietnam represents a cultural space that embodies both East Asian traditions and a legacy of Western cultural reception. In this context, the reception of F. Dostoevsky in Vietnam began relatively early, through French translations in the early twentieth century. However, this reception has unfolded in several distinct phases. Prior to 1945, Dostoevsky was regarded as a somewhat “foreign” yet intellectually compelling phenomenon, exerting an indirect influence on several modern Vietnamese writers such as Nam Cao and Thach Lam. During the period from 1954 to 1975, his reception diverged significantly between North and South Vietnam. In the North, engagement with Dostoevsky remained circumspect due to historical and political circumstances. In contrast, the South witnessed a vibrant reception, marked by numerous translations and in-depth scholarly writings that often linked Dostoevsky’s work with existentialist thought and Eastern philosophy. Since the Doi Moi (Renovation) era, Vietnamese engagement with Dostoevsky has become more comprehensive and systematic, facilitated by direct translations from Russian, advanced academic research, and even creative reinterpretations in theater and cinema [Pham Thi Phuong 2002; Trang Nguyen 2024]. Nonetheless, cinematic adaptations of Dostoevsky’s works in Vietnam remain a notable lacuna in scholarly inquiry.

Numerous scholarly works worldwide have examined artistic adaptations of F. Dostoevsky’s literature. However, the majority of these studies focus predominantly on adaptations produced in Europe and Russia. Alexander Burry defines Dostoevsky adaptations as “transmedial structures”, in which the original texts are reinterpreted through diverse media such as film, theater, and opera [Burry 2011]. In contemporary Russian scholarship, T.A. Kasatkina and A.B. Kuznetsova emphasize the concept of “worldview translation”, arguing that adapting Dostoevsky requires preserving the philosophical and theological depth of the original, rather than merely replicating the plot [Kasatkina & Kuznetsova 2020: 117—133]. In a more recent contribution, Olga Leontovich examines contemporary film adaptations and asserts that adaptation is not merely a reproduction of the source but can enrich or deepen its core messages [Leontovich 2022: 485—499]. Despite this growing body of work, studies on Dostoevsky’s cinematic presence in Asia, particularly in Vietnam, remain scarce. The doctoral dissertation of Le Thi Tuan (2021) constitutes the first systematic analysis of adaptations in Japan, India, and Vietnam (with references to South Korea, Sri Lanka, France, Italy, and Russia). Her research forges a new trajectory for investigating inter-semiotic translation and transcultural reception from an East Asian perspective [Le Thi Tuan 2021].

Situated within this scholarly context, this article examines the inter-semiotic and transcultural transformation of F. Dostoevsky’s novella *A Gentle Creature* through its cinematic adaptation *Dịu dàng* (*Gentle*, 2014), directed by Le Van Kiet [Le Van Kiet 2014]. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories of inter-semiotic translation, transcultural reception and comparative research methodology, the study investigates the dual

processes of medium translation (from literature to cinema) and cultural transposition (from nineteenth-century Russian contexts to contemporary Vietnam). The analysis pays particular attention to the strategies of localization and the modes of ethical — philosophical reinterpretation employed in Le Van Kiet's film. These elements highlight a profound process of "Vietnamization" of the universal humanistic values embedded in Dostoevsky's literature. As such, *Dịu dàng* functions not only as an inter-semiotic translation in the sense proposed by Roman Jakobson, but also as a cultural discourse that mediates between global philosophical currents and the layers of local consciousness. Through this approach, the article aims to elucidate a specific cultural phenomenon while also contributing to the broader global discourse on literary migration, semiotic translation, and transcultural dialogue in the twenty-first century.

A Gentle Creature was first published in the *Writer's Diary* (1876). In Vietnam, the novella has appeared in three distinct translations. The first is *Người thực nữ* ("The Gentle Lady") translated by Duong Duc Nhu in 1971. The second is *Người đàn bà nhẫn nhịn* ("The Patient Woman") by Duc Man, included in the anthology *Selected Short Stories and Novellas by F. Dostoevsky*, published by the Writers' Association Publishing House in 2006 [Dostoevsky 2006]. The most recent is *A Gentle Creature* ("A Gentle Girl") by Pham Manh Hung, published alongside *White Nights* by the Vietnam Writers' Association Publishing House in 2017. The novella was first adapted to film in 1960 by Soviet director Alexandr Borisov. Beyond Russia, *A Gentle Creature* has inspired several notable international adaptations, including *Une femme douce* (1969) by French director Robert Bresson [Bresson 1969], *The Gaze* (1990) by Indian filmmaker Mani Kaul, and *With You, Without You* (2012) by Sri Lankan director Prasanna Vithanage [Le Thi Tuan 2019: 114; Vithanage 2012]. To date, *A Gentle Creature* has been adapted into fourteen film versions across multiple countries, each representing a distinct aesthetic and cultural model.

Theoretical Framework and Approach

The adaptation of literary works into cinema has long been a prevalent creative strategy in global artistic practice. The concept of adaptation, derived from the Latin root *adaptare* ("to make something adaptive"), inherently implies a process of transformation and adjustment. Accordingly, Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, renowned for her contributions to adaptation studies and postmodernism, contends in her seminal work *A Theory of Adaptation* that adaptation should not be regarded merely as replication but as a dynamic site of creative reconfiguration, where meaning is reshaped within a new semiotic system "as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re-)creation" [Hutcheon 2006: 8]. In his seminal 1959 essay *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, Roman Jakobson, a Russian and American linguist and literary theorist, introduced the notion of inter-semiotic translation, defined as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" [Jakobson 1959: 233]. This concept established a foundational theoretical framework for understanding meaning transformations across semiotic modalities, particularly from literature to cinema. Building on this premise, scholars such as Umberto Eco [Eco 2000] and Peeter Torop [Torop 2013: 10.04.2025] have further elaborated the asymmetrical relationship between verbal language and

moving images, drawing attention to the interpretive potential and creative agency that emerge through semiotic transposition. More recently, Katerina Perdikaki has developed an analytical model of adaptation informed by inter-semiotic translation theory, foregrounding the restructuring of meaning and the impact of reception contexts [Perdikaki 2017: 10.04.2025].

In this study, drawing on a theoretical framework that combines Roman Jakobson and Linda Hutcheon with Lawrence Venuti's concept of *domestication* [Venuti 2007: 25–43], we analyze the film as both a “Vietnamized” version of Dostoevsky and a cultural discourse that reconfigures universal values from a local standpoint. Accordingly, this study views adaptation not as imitation, but as a meaning-making process rooted in the culture of reception, national identity, and the interpretive agency of the director as creative subject.

F. Dostoevsky's literature and the cinematic potential for “rewriting”

The cinematic adaptability of Dostoevsky's literature lies in its philosophical depth, polyphonic narrative structure, and complex psychological portrayals. “Dostoevsky seeks to reach the deepest depths of sanctified life with humanity. Man belongs to eternal depth. And the entire oeuvre of Dostoevsky is a performance of the human being” [Bakhtin 1998: 104]. This perpetual tension — between guilt and redemption, faith and doubt, good and evil — renders Dostoevsky's fiction a rich repository of philosophical and artistic material for both literature and cinema. A distinctive feature of his work is its universal thematic resonance such as freedom, choice, faith, responsibility, and forgiveness. Notably, from the perspective of character construction, Mikhail Bakhtin — a Russian philosopher and literary critic recognized for his theories of dialogism and the novel — offers a theory of polyphony that helps explain why Dostoevsky's characters continue to fascinate filmmakers: they are unfinished beings, not confined by a single ethical framework, but constantly in dialogue, self-questioning, and in a state of becoming [Bakhtin 1998; Berdyaev 2017]. Cinema, with its capacity for multi-perspectival narration and the immediate expression of visual and auditory signs, is uniquely equipped to ‘translate’ Dostoevsky's philosophical debates into rich layers of psychological and symbolic meaning. Furthermore, from the perspective of film narratology, the narrative architecture of Dostoevsky's novels — structured through chapter divisions, nonlinear temporalities, and interwoven psychological and philosophical undercurrents — lends themselves to modern cinematic techniques such as montage, flashback, and parallel editing. For this reason, Dostoevsky's literature is not merely ‘adaptable’ but seems to actively invite reinterpretation, precisely because of the intellectual challenge and creative demand it poses.

From the literary aesthetic of sublime realism to the cinematic aesthetic of naturalism: An inter-modal journey

The literature of F. Dostoevsky is considered a quintessential embodiment of the aesthetic of sublime realism. In *A Gentle Creature*, the story unfolds from an internal perspective, with the husband's narrative voice delving deep into a psychological world

fraught with conflict. When adapted by Le Van Kiet into the film *Dịu dàng*, this portrait is reimagined through a naturalistic aesthetic model. This is an aesthetic current that emerged in 19th-century France with a tendency to emphasize the trivial, the biological, and the instinctual. It is precisely this approach that makes *Dịu dàng* a gritty and visceral social-psychological film, rich with the textures of life.

F. Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Creature* is set in 19th-century Russia. The story chronicles the love and domestic life of a married couple marked by disparities in age and social status. They marry without love. Their marital life, lacking connection and sharing, leads to the wife's tragic death when she throws herself from a window. *Dịu dàng* re-narrates this tragic marital story against the backdrop of contemporary Vietnam. The director preserves the main event sequence from the source text and structures the story according to a familiar motif: Encounter (at the pawnshop) — Information Gathering (through the maid) — Proposal — Marriage — Conflict — Resolution (the wife's suicide), but envelops it in the socio-cultural biosphere of Vietnam's Southwestern region (mien Tay Nam bo). The director foregrounds external factors to emphasize the interaction between the characters and their environment. It is this socio-cultural context that generates a silent violence, impacting their marital life and, most notably, the characters' internal conflicts.

Regarding characterization, the director adopts a strategy of rewriting the characters by localizing the spiritual structure of F. Dostoevsky's figures. The "I" character is "reborn" in the form of Thien, a pawnshop owner who once attended a seminary. This character is obsessed with moral authority yet fails to practice his faith; he is insecure about others' perceptions and evades them by imposing power on the weak. The director highlights the character's patriarchal complex and his need for control as a form of atonement. Whereas in *With You, Without You*, the director uses the post-war Sri Lankan context to evoke collective trauma and silence as a form of "soft violence," *Dịu dàng* centers on moral obsession in modern Vietnamese society, where patriarchy is the cause that drives women to tragedy. Thien represents a "male creature" driven by a control complex, with almost pathological manifestations. Dustin Nguyen's portrayal (with a stern face, a rigid posture, and a slow, melancholic tone) creates a portrait of a ruler in a small world, yet one who is powerless in any moral dialogue.

Similarly, the character Linh, played by Thanh Tu, is starkly different from the proud female model of the original. Linh is an undereducated girl from the Mekong Delta whose parents died early, leaving her to live with two aunts and a flock of younger siblings. This character is "rewritten" as being constrained by her family circumstances, subjected to moral templates, and controlled by patriarchal ideology. She is typical of women trapped in the struggle between patriarchal culture and the dream of salvation (a familiar female redemptive archetype in F. Dostoevsky's literature). She is clearly an instinctual and intuitive creature. Linh's rebellion requires no reason; she acts on feeling, suffers in silence, and resists with a sewing needle and a gun, like a cornered animal. The performances of Thanh Tu and Dustin Nguyen in the film achieve a state of "acting as non-acting," a style close to *cinéma vérité* (truthful cinema). Notably, Le Van Kiet preserves the nature of Dostoevsky's characters as beings in a state of "becoming". In the film, both Thien and Linh are depicted as biological creatures torn by the silent collapse of human and social morality. This profound shift is a manifestation of

inter-semiotic translation; it is a transference of meaning from the 19th-century Russian metaphysical paradigm to the ethical paradigm of contemporary Vietnam.

In terms of plot, while the novella *A Gentle Creature* is a linear narrative with few major events, *Địu dàng* retains the main events but restructures the narrative line by inverting the timeline. Le Van Kiet employs the flashback technique as a mechanism for interrogating memory and recollection, representing a struggle with guilt, filled with contradiction and self-doubt. The slow, drawn-out transitions, using soft fade-ins and fade-outs without clear emphasis, further highlight the “flatness” of events and the fragmentation of the character's consciousness. Notably, the film's narrative does not adhere to a cause-and-effect logic. One of the film's most impressive scenes is when Thien kisses Linh's feet after she is dead. This is a detail retained from the original: “I kissed her feet, in a frenzy and full of happiness...”. But in the film, the action takes place in a silent, blue light, beside a window with a cross, a sacred space penetrated by death. It is no longer a gesture of repentance, but a final ritual of acknowledgment that love, without understanding and sharing, becomes nothing but sin. The director also skillfully employs interweaving multiple perspectives: that of Thien, the maid, of the surrounding community, and of religion. This narrative strategy transforms the story from the personal perspective of the source text into a broader social reflection, not only on marriage but also on the roles of men and women, and on the collapse of spiritual pillars in contemporary society.

The director also demonstrates meticulous care in translating words into sounds in the film. While in the source text F. Dostoevsky emphasizes internal monologue and the “polyphony” of ideas, *Địu dàng* radically curtails speech and dialogue. The director uses silence as a narrative material. The film's soundscape consists mainly of the sounds of wind, doors, water, a clock... These everyday sounds are amplified as if to replace the absence of spoken language. Linh's singing in the film can be seen as a key signifier. Unable to communicate in her marriage, Linh sings hymns in church; her voice rises as an anomaly in the suffocating space, serving as both a cry for help and a final, desperate plea of humanity. On the rooftop, it is this same song of spiritual freedom that awakens Thien; he kneels at Linh's feet, like a lamb before the Madonna. In that moment, Le Van Kiet visualizes the crucial Dostoevskian idea found in many of his works: that of male salvation and awakening through the female.

Thus, compared to F. Dostoevsky's original, which is structured as an internal discourse steeped in existential philosophy, Le Van Kiet's *Địu dàng* shifts towards naturalistic realism. The director does not seek sublimity in the soul but instead emphasizes the mundane, the raw, and the violent aspects of social reality in Vietnam.

From 19th-Century Russian culture to postcolonial Vietnam: A cross-cultural journey

The adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Creature* into the film *Địu dàng* by director Le Van Kiet is not merely a shift in medium but also a profound cultural translation, in which layers of 19th-century Russian cultural codes are reconfigured within the post-Đoi Moi context of early 21st-century Vietnam. While Western film

adaptations of *A Gentle Creature* often retain the urban structure, bourgeois society, and existential concerns of the original, *Dịu dàng* stands as a compelling example of cross-cultural adaptation marked by a high degree of localization. In this version, questions of religion, morality, and family structure are reimagined through the lens of a postcolonial society undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformation.

Le Van Kiet's *Dịu dàng* does not locate its narrative in Vietnam's major metropolitan centers, but instead opts for the Mekong Delta — an outlying, peripheral region of the country. This peripheral space is marked by a collision between traditional Confucian values and the emerging challenges of industrialization and modernization. As such, the film renders this locale as a society in flux, one that is losing its traditional cultural anchors. The family, once considered the most stable institution in the social structure, is now depicted as the most vulnerable site under the pressures of market capitalism and gender inequality. The domestic setting in the film is meticulously constructed, functioning simultaneously as physical space and symbolic domain. The upper floor — used as the bedroom — represents the realm of conjugal intimacy, while the pawnshop on the ground floor signifies the economic structure underpinning that relationship. Within both spatial registers, Linh embodies the marginalized subject, unprotected by law, community, or ethical norms. Her only refuge is the faith she carries in her inner world, embodying what Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, terms “precarious life” [Butler 2004: xvii] — a life exposed, unrecognized, and situated at the threshold of social intelligibility. In this cultural strategy, *Dịu dàng* articulates a deeper narrative about the rupture of the traditional Vietnamese family institution in the post-Doi Moi era. The family — once the moral nucleus of Confucian society — no longer possesses the ethical capacity to safeguard its most vulnerable members. The Confucian values of *phu xuong phu tuy* (the wife follows the husband) and hierarchical morality have been supplanted by a new order in which monetary power dictates social relations. The conjugal relationship in the film rests on a fragile foundation, where the wife becomes a “collateral asset” and Thien acts as the creditor who determines her value. In one key scene, Thien hands Linh's two aunts a bundle of envelopes — essentially the sum required to “purchase” Linh as a wife. The exchange lacks the sanctity of a traditional proposal, resembling instead a market transaction. Moral values like love or understanding are void, “bindings and bonds make human relations ‘impure’” — a form of “liquid love” fragile and transient in a consumer society [Bauman 2003: 47].

In addition to the fragile structure of marital and familial relationships, director Le Van Kiet foregrounds the dissonance in religious belief — the conflict of symbolic religious codes — as a subterranean current throughout the film. While Dostoevsky grounded in the tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, *Dịu dàng* is situated in a more universalized religious landscape, where God becomes the final refuge for the vulnerable. Christian symbols such as the crucifix, the Gospel of John, the image of the Virgin Mary, and the act of kneeling function as “semantic keys” that unlock the spiritual depth of the characters. In the film, Linh turns to God not out of devotion, but out of desperation — because she has no other locus of faith. More crucially, embedded within the latent struggle over faith between Linh and Thien is a deeper layer of conflict. Thien, who once studied in a Catholic seminary and preached the Gospel, has since

rejected God — not because he ceased to believe, but because he aspires to become God within the confines of his own household. Linh does not deny Thien's role as husband; what she resists is the installation of a "God-figure" in the domestic space. Unlike Dostoevsky's original work, where religion functions as an implicit ethical foundation, the director assembles a coherent semiotic system in which religion operates as both spiritual sanctuary and a failed promise of redemption. In the post-Doi Moi Vietnamese context — where traditional communal values are increasingly eroded, and individuals are relegated to affectless, alienated spaces such as pawnshops, desolate churches, and emotionally sterile dining tables — religion no longer performs the function of spiritual salvation. Rather, it becomes a site of deconstruction, where the female subject severs material ties in order to preserve her spiritual dignity. This represents a form of postcolonial aesthetics, in which spiritual values are reclaimed within a domain dominated by patriarchal authority, commodification, and gendered violence. It constitutes what Homi Bhabha, a Indian-English scholar and critical theorist, influential in postcolonial studies and cultural theory terms an "interstitial space" [Bhabha 1994: 5], where indigenous systems of value intersect with externally imposed structures of power, producing identities that are simultaneously hybrid and resistant.

Set within a society in transition, *Dịu dàng* does not soften Western influence but confronts it with the specificities of Vietnamese reality, thereby revealing deep social fractures. Its success lies not only in preserving Dostoevsky's ethical spirit but in rearticulating it through a moral paradigm grounded in trauma, solitary faith, and fragile hope. As a cross-cultural adaptation shaped by postcolonial sensibility, it avoids imitation and instead initiates a dialogic engagement between cultural systems. Here, adaptation is no longer an act of localization but a negotiation — where the local subject reconfigures global meanings from its wounded position.

Conclusion

The journey from *A Gentle Creature* to *Dịu dàng* exemplifies the cinematic capacity to reconfigure global cultural codes through the prism of local sensibilities. Through this process of transposition, F. Dostoevsky's worldview is reimagined within the socio-cultural, psychological, and existential terrain of postcolonial Vietnam. Director Le Van Kiet actively constructs his own discourse, grounded in the internal crises of contemporary Vietnamese society: the fragility of familial structures, the distortion of male authority, and the fragmentation of ethical life in the postcolonial aftermath. This discursive position is arguably rooted in the director's biography as a *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese) filmmaker. Occupying the liminal position of a "returnee" — at once inside and outside — he explores the lingering instabilities of the postcolonial condition, particularly gender inequality and the invisible forms of violence embedded in marital life. This positionality enables the film to remain intimately rooted in the local culture while maintaining the critical distance necessary to expose the systemic contradictions and repressions of a postcolonial society.

This adaptation moves beyond passive reception, becoming a means of reinterpreting identity and agency within globalization. It reframes Dostoevsky not as

static heritage but as a living, contested voice engaged in global dialogue. In doing so, the adaptation repositions world literature through peripheral perspectives — fragmented yet essential — demonstrating that such reimaginings are acts of cognition and cultural reconstruction. Dostoevsky thus remains vital, inviting new interpretations across time and space.

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