IV. AUDIOVIZUALINIAI TYRIMAI /
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From Verbal to Audiovisual Medium:
The Case of the Cinematic Adaptation of R. L. Stevenson's
Novel "The Wrong Box". Part II

The paper attempts at the analysis of the narrational shifts between verbal and audiovisual mediums on the basis of R. L. Stevenson's novel "The Wrong Box" (1989) and its cinematic adaptation under the same title by Bryan Forbes (1966). The authors approach adaptation as a complex phenomenon that experiences the creative tension between preserving fidelity to the source literary text and striving for

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filmic originality. Similarly to novels, movies represent an act and art of narration but they use different narrative strategies. In film narratives, deep focus, the length and scale of the shots, editing, montage, lighting, sound design, music, human voice etc. accompany the verbal medium. Modelled after literature, movies demonstrate the specific construal narrative components that are combined into coherent cinematic sequences.

When transfering R. L. Stevenson's novel from fictional medium into cinematic medium, Forbes organises the relations of the narrative elements on an intertextual level thus fostering new expressive means. Such practice allows to project the cinematic narrator as a complex construct also given the possibility of being perceived as a speaking persona through an inventive use of intertitles. In fact, the adaptor is caught up in the farcical narrational game, provoking the viewer to actively participate in it.

KEYWORDS: Cinematic Adaptation, Literary Narrative, Film Narrative, Intertitle Discourse, Multimedial.

Cinematic narration without verbal elements

In the film, an excellent example of how the audiovisual narrative elements interact without being supported by the written or spoken words is the scene in which Michael offers to help Julia with the box that by mistake has been delivered to her house. As he is hauling the gigantic box into the cellar, Julia observes him on the top of the stairs. The perceptual information is captured through a camera which presents a close-up of Michael's tense arm, followed by an amorous gaze from Julia. Filled with desire, she rushes out into another room and twirls around with a dramatic expression on her face and her hand on her chest as if gasping for air. Michael, who noticed the way Julia was looking at him, flies up the stairs and finds her sitting in an armchair, breathing heavily. The camera then interchangeably shows the close-ups of Julia's ankle, Michael's desirous countenance, her heaving chest, and his muscular arms, followed by the shots of the lovers' faces looking at each other. The frames change faster and faster, the extreme close-ups of their lips and eyes and even of a single gigantic eye are presented until, finally, the scene culminates with a kiss. Throughout the sequence, none of the characters say a word to each other, nor are there any other verbal cues given. Nevertheless, by participating in the story construction, the audience understands perfectly well what is being signified. The viewers confront the systematic employment of various cinematic techniques. The close-up shots focus their attention on the corporeal features of the characters and their lustful glances which linked together clearly indicate that they are much attracted to each other. Moreover, the entire scene is presented in slow motion; it is accompanied with a romantic melody which helps set a designed mood on the basis of the narrative logic that the generic frame requires. In this scene, different variables, such as camerawork, editing, actor performance and soundtrack supplement each other thus constituting a specific cinematic narrator.

Perception of words vs. images

The way the corpse is presented in both versions is also important to discuss. In the novel, R. L. Stevenson does not elaborate on its description, but rather offers a short statement of the sight: "In the bottom of a sandy hole lay something that had once been human. The face had suffered severely, and it was unrecognisable" (Stevenson, Osbourne 1889: 31). There is not much detail, whatsoever. For a second, a ghastly image of the distorted face flashes in the reader's mind. Contrariwise, the adaptation rejects giving such glimpse of the corpse, except for the sight of its dressed legs with shoes, soles up in the scene after the crash and a hand protruding from the barrel in another episode. The reason may be found in the different nature of words and images. According to George Bluestone (1968: 20), "word-symbols must be translated into images of things, feelings and concepts through the process of thought. Where the moving picture comes to us directly through perception, language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension". In other words, literature moves from the word as a symbolic sign to its visualisation in the reader's mind, whereas film demonstrates the opposite movement from the image to its symbolic meaning. More precisely, in a novel, words are firstly processed before they evoke images, while in film images strike the viewers' senses instantaneously. Thus, images have a direct and therefore a stronger narrational effect on the audience than words do. That is why the image of a corpse turns to be much more disturbing in the film than its depiction in the book. On the whole, including such scenes in comedies is an uncommon practice, since they might shock the audience rather than make them laugh. It is worth noting that before the late 1960s violence in film was far less capturing than it is today (cf. Prince 2003: 30). The Hollywood Production Code (1938) which presented the guidelines for filmmaking banned "excessive brutality, <…> depictions of suicide [and] held that depictions of murder be kept to a minimum" (Prince 2003: 31). While the adaptation of the novel *The Wrong Box* was intended for a British audience, due to the fact that it was distributed by a Hollywood film company (Columbia Pictures) the director had to follow the rules of this cinema industry. Hence, the scene describing the corpse was omitted due to two reasons: strict cinematic conventions and because it would have clashed with the wacky tone of the adaptation.

The Function of Dialogue in Literary and Cinematic Discourse of *The Wrong Box*

As it was observed earlier, the ways the story is rendered to the audience in the two mediums are very different. While in film much information is provided via dialogue, literature relies heavily on the narrator to fulfil this task. Nevertheless, the examples taken from R. L. Stevenson's novel show that literary dialogue performs a number of important functions as well.

With regard to Sarah Kozloff's categorisation of the functions of film dialogue, it should be stressed that in the analysed adaptation the examples of location and character identification via dialogue are most frequent. Since traditional character description found

in fiction is uncinematic in its nature, in film, description requires a different projection which is achieved by placing the characters in particular situations where they introduce themselves to each other and, simultaneously, to the audience. This is the case when Michael first meets Julia at the beginning of the film:

JULIA: So, you're Michael Finsbury?
MICHAEL: Yes. Actually, Michael Hubert Gregory Finsbury.
JULIA: And I am your cousin Julia.[3]

As the girl tells her name and reveals her relation to him, she is instantaneously given an identity and the viewers become aware of her as a character. The same happens when Morris tells John to go and see how Uncle Joseph is doing, or when Michael addresses Masterman as grandfather. Such technique substitutes the description made by the literary narrator who introduces all the characters at the beginning of the story. Although the filmic introduction seems unnatural, as in some instances the characters address each other in full name or refer to their professions, cinema has its benefits when it comes to character description. The camera shows how a personage looks like avoiding linguistic elements. Although Chatman (1980: 128) rightly pointed out that, contrary to fiction, film does not allow to slow down the action and take a good look at the character, it does not mean that camera cannot 'describe'. In film, the dialogical lines are always complemented by other elements, such as the character's gestures, facial expressions, intonations, etc. that comprehensively describe him/her as a character.

Moving to another function of the filmic dialogue, which, like in the case of literary dialogue, comments on the action and helps the audience connect the events within a cause and effect chain, the scene after the train crash where Morris sets forth his scheme while John is burying the dead body might serve as a good example to be discussed. Consider:

MORRIS: Now what we need is a venal doctor.
JOHN: But uncle Joseph's dead, it's too late!
MORRIS: Not for him, for us! Now, you remember that chamber made you got into…
JOHN: Thing.
MORRIS: Who was the doctor who did the…?
JOHN: Thing. Uh, Pratt, doctor Pratt!
MORRIS: Was he venal?
JOHN: Well, I didn't have to ask.
MORRIS: Well, did he do the…?
JOHN: Thing? Yes! But what's he got to do with it?
MORRIS: He's part of the plan! Now you and I are the only two people in the world who know that uncle Joseph is…
JOHN: Thing.

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[3] This and further excerpts are taken from the movie *The Wrong Box* (Forbes 1966).

MORRIS: …dead. And we won't tell anyone.

JOHN: But people are bound to find out sooner or later!

MORRIS: Not quite yet. Now, uncle Masterman at best has only two or three days to live. When he goes, I'll announce that uncle Joseph has died of a heart attack on hearing the tragic news of his brother's death. I then go along to your accommodated doctor…

JOHN: Pratt.

MORRIS: …thing. He provides me with a blank death certificate for uncle Joseph, I fill in the date and the tontine is mine!

Morris' verbalisation of his plan functions as a contextual scheme for the following events. Moreover, during this conversation John identifies the venal doctor as Doctor Pratt. Hence, when Morris is shown in another scene entering a dingy room full of cats and addresses the man lying on the couch as Doctor Pratt, the two scenes become causally linked. Since there are no visual signifiers that might indicate the room as a doctor's office, it is the dialogue that becomes the signifier of the location.

Considering that the analysed adaptation followed the generic conventions of the source text to a greater or lesser extent, the film relies heavily on physical, sometimes rough humour. Here dialogue links the narrative events that are effectuated via action, with the characters chasing one another, trains crashing, coffins and boxes constantly transported in and out the door. Although dialogue seems to occupy a significant place in the adaptation, it should be stressed that it is used to produce witty discourse typical of the genre of farce rather than substitute action. Therefore, the examples of event enactment by using dialogue are very rare. The most prominent one is the final scene of the film in which the detective reveals the following information that is important for the plot:

THE DETECTIVE (addressing Michael): Young man, did you know there was a body in the piano?

PEACOCK: I did it.

THE DETECTIVE (addressing Michael): Who is he?

MICHAEL: He is the butler, sir.

THE DETECTIVE: The butler did it?

MICHAEL: No, sir. I put the body there.

THE DETECTIVE: Is this true?

MICHAEL: Yes, sir.

THE DETECTIVE: In that case you are entitled to a reward of one thousand pounds. You're responsible for bringing the Bournemouth Strangler to his just end.

It is worth considering Kozloff's (2000: 41) insight here that cinematic dialogue functions as a source of vital information which the viewers lack in order to fill a missing link in the narrative. In the analysed filmic episode, the role of the detective is not clear until the last scene of the movie. The austere countenance of the personage suggests that he might be persecuting Michael because he suspects him of committing a murder. However, it is not

until this verbal exchange that the spectators are able to link the narrative events together despite the reversal of their expectations related with the detective movie experience and realise that, paradoxically, the detective does not seek to punish anybody, but rather to reward. Hence, it is the dialogue that helps reveal why the detective was persecuting the characters. In other words, it is the dialogue that contains an element of intrigue.

A good example of the fourth function of dialogue/monologue, i.e. character revelation is the scene where Morris finds the dead body amid the train wreckage. He rushes to it and after having mistakenly identified it as the body of Joseph and unleashes his emotions by scolding his supposedly deceased uncle:

> MORRIS: Now you listen to me, uncle Joseph, you may be dead, but you listen to me! You're a nasty, mean, spiteful, vindictive old man to do this to two little orphans! Your brother's on his deathbed, couldn't you have waited a day or so?! You stupid, old…!

The character reveals his feelings via his mono speech (since he has another character as his listener), whereas in the novel, it is the narrator who describes Morris's inner state in the mentioned situation. Consider: "Here was a last injustice; he had been robbed while he was an orphan at school, he had been lashed to a decadent leather business, he had been saddled with Miss Hazeltine, his cousin had been defrauding him of the tontine, and he had borne all this, we might almost say, with dignity, and now they had gone and killed his uncle!" (Stevenson, Osbourne 1889: 32). The literary narrator is able to reveal the entire thought process going on in Morris's head, while in the adaptation the verbal act is much more expressive, since it is rendered directly by the character. Moreover, his resentful speech is enhanced by the non-linguistic elements, such as adequate facial expressions and intonations. Thus, although literature is able to reveal the characters' feelings indirectly through the figure of narrator, cinema, in its turn, also has its advantages regarding character revelation.

Another important aspect that to consider is not only what the characters say, but also how they do it. In this respect, the cinematic dialogue operates similarly to the literary dialogue: both are able to characterise the personages. In the film, the most distinct character with respect to his verbal discourse is Peacock. He speaks very slowly and has trouble with articulating the words. His speech, often incoherent and difficult to be heard distinctly, along with his husky voice complement the portrait of the character as a decrepit old butler. In R. L. Stevenson's novel, one of the principle personages, Joseph exudes his intellectual abilities through his specific language. He is distinguished for his loquacity. The narrator describes him as a man who has "a taste for general information" and the "itch of public speaking" (Stevenson, Osbourne 1889: 4). Indeed, Joseph demonstrates his knowledge and eloquence in every dialogue that he is part of, thus turning it into a comic monological lecture rather than a conversation. Contrary to the cinematic version of Peacock who is defined in an auditory manner, i.e. by his voice, the literary version of Joseph is characterised by verbal means. Hence, in the novel, it is *what* the characters say rather than *how* they do it which is more prominent. Although the verbal acts are supplemented by the

narrator's commentaries which describe the way the words are uttered, the readers can only imagine what the word exchange sounds like; whereas in the film, the auditory channel gives the audience a chance to hear the dialogue as if it were natural. Thus, it is the voice and manner of speaking that become more important in depicting the characters. There is no need to introduce a voice-over narrator to interpret the characters' discourse verbally; instead, cinema offers a "simultaneous signification of camerawork/mise-en-scène/editing" (Kozloff 2000: 17), which gives the speech a particular context and co-text. Here dialogue does not narrate entirely by itself; it is supplemented by the actor's voice, facial expressions, the movement of the camera, editing of the shots and a number of other variables, which through interaction constitute the cinematic narrator.

Conclusions

It becomes evident that the majority of debates about screen adaptations eventually turn to the subjective consideration of what the filmic medium lacks in comparison to its literary counterpart, which undoubtedly narrows the research horizons. Actually, adaptation criticism should reconsider the hierarchical relationship between literature and cinema and view the source text and the target text not as an original and a copy, but rather as equal texts capable of constructing the same story by employing different narrative instruments. The case of *The Wrong Box* in its literary and cinematic versions serves as a good illustration of how the shift in mediums does not alter the story as such. Bryan Forbes's filmic adaptation is undeniably not identical to Robert Louis Stevenson's novel; nevertheless, it should not be taken as a new work, but rather as a different variation, or, to put it in semiotic terms, its translation into cinematic language.

Concerning narrative events, the adaptation presents several changes in the cinematic plot. Nevertheless, it preserves the key episodes of the original storyline. The adaptor condenses the length of the story by omitting certain events. Yet, on the other hand, in the movie some episodes of the original storyline are expanded to emphasise some particular aspects of the filmic plot. Since the film is constructed on the basis of the Classical Hollywood narrative structure, the director makes the storyline more appealing to the cinematic audience by developing the romantic relationship between Julia and Michael, the protagonist of the story. However, this alteration does not overshadow the principal line of action revolving around the tontine.

In the film, the locations are altered as well. The adaptor condenses the space of the story and concentrates the movie's action in the domestic spaces rather than having them chase one another all over London, as R. L. Stevenson does in his novel. Since the characters are situated closer to each other, they can reveal their crafty schemes faster. Due to the cinematic conventions, Forbes reduces his filmic story into a time frame suitable for a movie by condensing the spatio-temporal features.

The adaptor increases the pace of the plot by introducing additional mix-ups of boxes and characters. In this respect, he adheres to the generic conventions of farce, in which the quick unfolding of events is crucial.

Both in the novel and its adaptation, the narrators vary greatly. The literary narrator is a person, an acquaintance of Michael, whereas the cinematic narrator is imperceptible, encompassing a number of cinematic variables.

Very inventively, Forbes complements his filmic narrative by adding intertitles which make the cinematic narrator resemble the literary narrator by turning him visible to the film audience. However, the very fact that the adaptation includes many sequences where the storyline is perfectly clear without additional verbalisation suggests that in the film the intertitles are used for aesthetic purposes as a specific stylistic device rather than a significant tool in plot construction. Forbes introduces the intertitles as an archaic mode of cinematic narration to create a vintage atmosphere of the Victorian period mocked by R. L. Stevenson in his book and to enhance the comic effect.

Both literary and cinematic dialogues have equivalent functions, such as linking the narrative events, advancing the plot and characterising the personages. Actually, considering narrative construction, dialogical verbal exchange is found as more important on screen, as it provides the audience with the vital information which in the novel is often given via the narrator. In books, dialogue is more significant in terms of characterisation, because the expressive discourse of the personages helps depict them by creating their more vivid portraits in the reader's mind. Whereas in cinema characterisation relies heavily on the auditory and visual channels, therefore, the personages are characterised not as much by what they say, but rather by how they do it. Hence, the verbal exchanges of the cinematic personages are supplemented by non-linguistic elements, such as distinctive vocal features, appearance, facial expressions and manners to follow the generic narrative logic of cinematic farce.

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