

## IV. AUDIOVIZUALINIAI TYRIMAI / BADANIA NAD AUDIOWIZUALNOŚCIĄ

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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 I

*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 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 transferring 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.*

*KEY WORDS: Cinematic Adaptation, Literary Narrative, Film Narrative, Intertitle Discourse, Multimedial.*

## Introduction

Adaptation has always been an integral part of cinematography. However, scholars and film critics ignored research on adaptation for the larger part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, either because they saw it as an attempt to mimic literature, or because they did not distinguish it as a separate form of cinema altogether. One of the main problems that arises in film adaptation is equivalence. What happens to a story when it is presented in a different medium? To answer this and other questions, to illustrate the similarities and differences between the literary and filmic versions of the same story, the comparative analysis of R. L. Stevenson's novel *The Wrong Box* (1889) and its screen adaptation under the same title produced and directed by Bryan Forbes in 1966 has been carried out.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) constructed his novel *The Wrong Box* on the basis of a rough sketch of a farcical story written by his stepson Samuel Lloyd Osbourne (1868–1947) (Ambrosini 2007: 151). While the authorship is attributed to them both, it was R. L. Stevenson who suffused it with comic vitality and critical insights into the issues of Victorian society. It is worth noting that the production of the novel was in itself an act of adaptation where a draft was used as a source text to be transformed into a new one matching the socio-cultural environment of the time. Thus, in the case of the movie *The Wrong Box*, the audience is confronted with the complexity of the *adaptation of adaptation* phenomenon: here literary adaptation playfully interacts with cinematic adaptation.

Due to the medium particularities typical of fiction and cinema, the structuring of the narrative in each of them varies greatly. It is so because “literature and film demonstrate diverse principles of aesthetic organisation” (Verstraten 2009: 14). Hence the object of the paper is the narrative elements of the novel *The Wrong Box* and its cinematic counterpart. It aims at revealing how they operate and interact in the verbal and audiovisual mediums allowing for a fruitful dialogical communication between two artistic representations.

It is important to stress that the carried-out analysis is not concerned with the discussion of whether and how much the adaptation remains faithful to the original book. Rather, it focuses on the specific narrative instruments observed in the two different mediums. In the given paper, Bryan Forbes's film and R. L. Stevenson's novel are treated as texts equally capable of structuring the same story in their own way by “organising meaning through a combination of various levels of narration” (Schmidt 2013).

The authors extend an interdisciplinary approach combining narratology, cinema and literary studies, also adding a semiotic paradigm that views adaptation as translation from the novelistic into cinematic language. The relevance and novelty of the paper concern the following: firstly, the choice of the empirical material, since R. L. Stevenson's novel *The Wrong Box* and its cinematic version by Bryan Forbes have not been discussed in the context of film adaptation; secondly, research on cinematic adaptation is still a novel field of enquiry both in Lithuania and abroad.

## The relationship between the source text and the target text in filmic adaptation

The widespread issue of fidelity in film adaptation claims that to be successful a movie must conform to the major aspects of the literary source text. However, such hierarchical relationship is not based solely on the conviction that the original is always better than its copy, rather it is the result of a deep-rooted belief that one type of art is better than the other (Stam 2005: 4). Hence, the supporters of the principle of fidelity insist that older arts are better thus diminishing the status of cinema as a younger art. Kamilla Elliot maintains that film adaptation is "derivative" since it employs the elements from other arts "insisting moreover on its inferiority to the arts on which it [draws]" (2009: 115). On the one hand, film adaptors are often criticised for their inability to create original screenplays; on the other hand, paradoxically, they are criticised for not remaining faithful to the literary source text.

Robert Stam (2005: 8) offers a new approach to the mentioned book vs. film debate. He distinguishes the impact of the structuralist and post-structuralist thought on adaptation studies and argues that film and literature should be treated as equal semiotic systems capable of producing texts. He rejects the hierarchical relationship between literature and cinema on the basis of the *father-son* or *master-slave* paradigms and speaks of the horizontal relationship between all types of texts. The critic relies on Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality that approaches every text as a permutation of other texts (Stam 2005: 8). The followers of this theory question the existence of originals or copies as such because a text that is considered an original is, in fact, a compilation of previous texts which, in turn, shows it being a copy as well. Therefore, treated as canonical ones, literary texts lose their prestigious position and are placed on the same level as adaptations. This allows for the idea that adaptation research should not focus exclusively on the comparative or contrastive analysis of the two mediums in the context of fidelity, but rather concentrate on the exploration of their individual means of ordering the narrative. Stam (2005: 26) also notes that adaptation, viewed as translation in its broadest sense, goes through inevitable changes of the source text, evoking pluses and minuses, yet it is typical of the process of translation in general. Like other translations, an adaptation can be unsuccessful; yet in any case, its ill-success should not be associated with infidelity to the source text.

Other scholars insist that adaptation should be regarded as translation, since it reflects the relationship between texts more appropriately than the term 'adaptation' does. According to Linda Costanzo Cahir (2006: 14), to adapt means "to alter the structure or function of an entity so that it is better fitted to survive <...> in its new environment", thus allowing literary texts to experience their rebirth in a new artistic environment through interaction between different types of art. It is worth mentioning here that, in the case of translation, a text is rendered from one language to another, but to put it in the scholar's wording, it is "a process of language" rather than "a process of survival" which results in a completely new text that "has a strong relationship with its original source, yet is fully independent from it" (Cahir 2006: 14). In other words, to think of adaptation as translation means to consider it as a separate entity which may be appreciated without the audience being familiar

with the original literary source. He argues that every translation is first and foremost an interpretation of the source text and no single correct way of how to adapt or translate texts has been worked out. To say more, this raises the question whether a cinematic adaptation can, or should remain faithful to its fictional source text at all. The very fact of shifting from a purely verbal medium of the book to an audiovisual medium of the film automatically provokes the semiotic differences which make absolute fidelity very unlikely. Rachel Carroll (2009: 1) argues that every adaptation is rather “an instance of textual infidelity” as it fluctuates between the paradigms of fidelity and cinematic originality.

Nevertheless, a popular approach is to judge an adaptation by its fidelity to the ‘letter’ and the ‘spirit’ of the novelistic text (Bazin 2004: 67). Such classification means that even if a filmic adaptation consistently reproduces the narrative units of the source text, it still lacks the full essence encoded in the original. Stam (2005: 15) criticises this idea by claiming that texts have no “transferable core” and therefore they are open for interpretation, whereas the so called spirit of a text is just a matter of “critical consensus” expressed by the literati and critics who try to impose a single possible reading of a fictional story. In fact, adaptation should be treated as the product of the negotiation with the original.

Rejecting the traditional rhetoric dominating in adaptation studies and criticism which emphasises what a text loses during its metamorphosis from page to screen, the authors of the given paper will focus on the benefits brought by the productive interaction of the medium-specific narrative representations.

### **Narrative organisation in literature and film**

Contemporary narratology extends the idea that narration is not bound to any specific medium but operates as an independent structure, or “text organization” (Chatman 1980: 121). Therefore, it should not be understood as a legacy of fiction, because it is a “genetic material or DNA” (Stam 2005: 10) of any text. In this approach, both literature and film possess “complex and complicated mechanisms of narrative communication” (Schärfe 2003: 7) despite the fact that at the very beginning cinema was “neither created nor experienced as a narrative medium” aiming at “the experience of the moving filmed objects” (Verstraten 2009: 14).

The term ‘narrative’ is traditionally referred to as “a spoken or written account of connected events; a story” (EOLD) which suits both the literary and the filmic mode. Edward Branigan (1992: 3) identifies narrative as “a way of organizing spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end”. They can be described as the basic elements of a story that answer the questions of *who*, *what* and *where*. However, Brian McFarlane (1996: 13) argues that a literary narrative contains the elements which cannot be transferred on screen and distinguishes between the processes of “transfer” and “adaptation proper”. For him, the elements that require adaptation are abstractions, things that cannot be rendered and grasped visually, which is what André Bazin (2004: 67) most probably refers to as the *spirit* of a text. Seymour Chatman (1980: 128), in his turn, maintains that the majority of film narratives have such a “textual order” where “the dominant mode

is presentational, not assertive”, thus suggesting that film depicts, yet it does not describe. In any case, “narration reveals itself as an interpretative frame” (Verstraten 2009: 26).

As communicative practices, a novel and a film send a message which the readers/viewers then receive. However, this message is not sent by the book or the film *per se*, but with the help of a narrator. In literature, the narrator has a human quality in a sense that the reader feels like there is some person telling the story, whereas in most films there is no such presence of a story-teller (Lothe 2000: 30). Compared to the cinematic narrator, its literary counterpart has many variations, such as a reliable or unreliable narrator, an omniscient narrator etc. It can also shift from the first or third person narration to a “free indirect discourse” (Lothe 2000: 35) and thus constantly modify the narrator’s relationship with the story. Whereas in film, the narrator is not fixed, it is imperceptible and cannot be referred to as a person, with an exception of voice-over narration, in which the story becomes verbalised and voiced, thereby coming closer to literature. However, the role of the voice-over narrator is episodic and limited; it usually acts as a commentator for the story rather than its teller.

In cinema, narrative can also be presented in a written form with the help of intertitles which were used in silent movies to render dialogue, or to explain the plot. Still, these instances constitute a relatively small part of film production: the vast majority of movies do not use voice-over or intertitles, yet the audience understands the story perfectly well. As Chatman (1980 cited in Lothe 2000: 30) posits, the multimodal cinematic narrator is a complex system containing multiple variables, such as camera, editing, lighting, location, performance of actors, music etc. It must be carefully structured by the film adaptor as he is adapting and at the same time constructing the cinematic meaning, creating a complex system of successive encoded signs so that the audience would have a reliable basis to interpret the cinematic story.

## **Dialogue as a tool for narrative construction**

A very important element representing the cinematic narration is dialogue. In her book *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, Sarah Kozloff (2000: 18) states that, as a narrative form of art, cinema “has been and will continue to be dependent upon dialogue as an integral part of its arsenal”. Indeed, dialogue fulfils a number of functions in communicating the narrative, four of which are relevant to the present research. The first function is the “anchorage of the diegesis and characters” (2000: 33) which helps identify the location and the characters of the story. Similarly to Chatman, Kozloff argues that though film shows, it does not identify. No doubt, the camera can take the viewer to any place in the world, yet that place must be identified by adequate verbal signs to make the audience aware of what this place exactly is. The same rule is applied to the character portrayal. While the camera shows a particular character, the viewers do not know who the character is. Therefore, in most cases, a person is introduced “via on-screen greetings and meetings” (Kozloff 2000: 36) which help the audience identify the character.

Another function of dialogue in film narrative proposed by Kozloff (2000: 33) is “communication of narrative causality” which allows the audience to understand why the

events are unfolding in a particular way. In this respect, dialogue serves as a commentary for the visuals. The characters give information that creates a particular context for a coming up event, interpret what is going on at the moment, or present a film's backstory, i.e. the information that is not depicted in the movie. Thus, even a single conversation between characters can prepare the audience for an entire chain of events that are going to take place. As Alin Remael (2004: 109) maintains, dialogue is both "context-dependent and context-renewing"; it "modif[ies] the entire narrative situation" (Remael 2003: 229) and supports the movie's dramatic structure.

The third function is the "enactment of narrative events" (Kozloff 2000: 33) in which the characters enact certain events not through action, but through dialogue: these are the key events of the story where the personages disclose secrets, extend information vital to the plot, confess, or declare love to another character. Cinematic dialogue "modif[ies] the entire narrative situation" (Remael 2003: 229) and supports the movie's dramatic structure.

It should be stressed that event enactment via dialogue is a common practice in fiction. However, dialogically rendered events are most often supplemented by the literary narrator who comments on the characters' inner state, especially in emotional dramatic scenes. Indeed, this is what film theorists view as a major flaw of the cinematic narrator, i.e. the fact that it cannot render the characters' feelings without some sort of external signification, be it dialogue, facial expressions, or body language. Furthermore, in movies, the "visual point of view" is always present because the camera needs to be pointed at something, while in literature, the narrator does not have such a fixed position as he can "peer over a character's shoulder", "[comment] indifferently on the front, sides and back of the object" (Chatman 1980: 132–133), and, most importantly, look inside the character's inner world.

Kozloff (2000: 33) expounds on this insight while discussing the fourth function of dialogue in film narrative, which is "character revelation". She considers dialogue and monologue as tools with which the characters reveal their thoughts and emotions verbally. Moreover, it is important to consider not only what the characters say but also how they do it. Indeed, dialect and "distinct verbal mannerism" (Kozloff 2000: 43) can tell a lot about a character and his/her personality. In this respect, the cinematic dialogue is more advantageous because it allows the audience to see and hear how the characters speak as opposed to reading a written account of the dialogue in a book. Yet, the involvement of the imagination on the part of the audience is limited to what is audiovisually imposed by the adaptor's cinematic interpretation. On the other hand, due to verbal dialogical lines some space is still left for the spectators' individual interpretation allowing to interpret the interpreters.

### **Narrative presentation in the novel *The Wrong Box* and its filmic adaptation: spatio-temporal modifications**

Before starting the empirical analysis it is worth introducing a short summary of the plot manifesting itself in both texts. The story of *The Wrong Box* revolves around brothers Joseph and Masterman Finsbury who are members of a tontine, i.e. an investment fund in

which the entire fortune is given to the last person alive. The action starts when Joseph's nephew Morris develops an inventive scheme to receive the fortune. Morris and his younger brother John get into a railway accident on their way to London. Amid the wreckage, Morris and John find a corpse which they mistake for their uncle. Afraid that Masterman will receive the tontine, the brothers hide the body in a barrel and send it to their London home. On the way, the barrels get switched – it is a fatal act which results in everybody getting 'the wrong box'.

Since the given paper focuses on the structural elements vital for the construction of both narratives, the arrangement of the events should be firstly considered. It is important to stress that, in the cinematic version of the book, the key events of the unfolding narratives are very similar. However, the movie demonstrates obvious spatial and temporal alterations in the narrational organisation as well as modifications with regard to narrator: it is worth remembering here that a movie is not a mere event structure.

As Linda Hutcheon (2013: 11) points out, an adaptation can switch the order of events, add new ones or omit those that exist in the original story. Moreover, the pace of the story can be manipulated by extending some of the scenes or making them shorter for various interpretative or cinematic reasons. In this respect, the adaptation of R. L. Stevenson's novel *The Wrong Box* presents only slight variations of the plot throughout the entire film.

While some episodes of the original story are omitted due to cinematic conventions regarding the time frame, some units in the screen adaptation are found to be expanded to draw the spectators' attention to an additionally introduced turn in the plot. A good example is the love story between Julia Hazeltine and Gideon Forsyth introduced in the novel. However, in the adaptation, the latter is replaced with Michael Finsbury due to character condensation. On the other hand, the character shift allowed for an expansion of the romantic storyline. Though Stevenson also introduces a few amorous episodes aside from the adventurous chase for the tontine events, he is not interested in their development as they do not involve the principal characters. Forbes, on the contrary, gives much more attention to romance by scheming new relationship between Julia (Nanette Newman) and Michael (Michael Cane), who is the protagonist in the film. It is worth noting here that movies based on the Classical Hollywood narrative structure always have at least two storylines developing interdependently around the same group of characters. As a rule, one of these storylines involves a romantic relationship, because it gives the story a "human appeal" (Bordwell et al. 2005: 16). Furthermore, love often functions as the principal motivation for action, or becomes an additional goal for the character apart from his objectives in the main storyline. Either way, it helps the story advance and binds the events together providing them with causality. In the novel, Michael's only motivation for action is getting rid of the barrel with the body, whereas in the adaptation he is also on the quest to win over Julia's heart.

Significant transmutations of the original narrative occur in such instances when the scenes from the source text are completely omitted, added or replaced by the new plot units in the adaptation. Even though films are much more limited in terms of time than books, this does not concern the story-time: the cinematic adaptor can manipulate the passage

of time by making the events develop faster or slower than they would in real life. The adaptation of *The Wrong Box* presents one of such examples where a long period of time unravels at the very beginning of the movie. The opening scene shows the members of the tontine as young boys, followed by the episodes in which they are portrayed as adults dying in ridiculous circumstances one after another, and, finally, the story comes to the two remaining survivors who are now old-aged men. Thus, the sequential scenes project an entire lifespan of the characters. The sequence constitutes no more than ten minutes of the film, because it functions only as a background for the story; therefore, the adaptors had to condense it in order to save time for the development of the rest of the storyline. As for time representation, similar techniques are used in fiction. Novels are often divided into chapters which split the plot into separate, albeit interconnected episodes. Here too, the change of an episode often evokes alterations in time and space. Stevenson divides his book into small chapters, each presenting a new twist to the story thus creating an impression that the events are unfolding rapidly, whereas in cinematography, this effect is achieved with editing. The movie also introduces more complications to the plot that increase the pace of the narrative and help it develop more quickly. It can also be explained by the fact that the novel is R. L. Stevenson's attempt at generic experimentation with farce, a genre in which turbulent action is a vital necessity. Hence the analysed film adaptation experiences, to put it in Peter Verstraten's (2009: 12) wording, "a narrative pressure" by being bound to the viewers' narrative expectations formed by the original novel.

### **The shift of narrator**

Having discussed the cinematic modifications of the narrative sequence, it is important to explore the agent that renders these events in both analysed texts. It has already been observed that the literary and the cinematic narrator vary considerably. The literary narrator is easier to define since he communicates with the reader verbally, as though he was a real person telling a story. R. L. Stevenson shifts the grammatical perspective from the third to the first person for several times, thus allowing the narrator to reveal his first-hand involvement in the story: "I know Michael Finsbury personally; my business – I know the awkwardness of having such a man for a lawyer – still it's an old story now, and there is such a thing as gratitude, and, in short, my legal business, although now (I am thankful to say) of quite a placid character, remains entirely in Michael's hands" (Stevenson, Osbourne 1889: 154). Such an appearance of the first-person narrator reminds the readers of the story-teller's presence. However, the first-person narration ends shortly after the quoted passage and the rest of the story is told via the third person through "explicit, non-character narration" (Schärfe 2003: 61).

It is interesting to note that in his cinematic version of *The Wrong Box* Forbes chooses to employ the technique which helped construct the narrative in the silent film era. He supplements the auditory channel by introducing intertitles in between the scenes. This creates a similar effect as the shift from the third-person to the first-person narration in the novel. Like in the book, where the narrator unexpectedly reminds the readers of his subjective



presence in the middle of the story, the invisible cinematic narrator becomes perceptible due to the appearance of a graphic-verbal text in between the shots, revealing to the audience that the teller of the story does exist. In this respect, intertitles serve an important purpose in the construction of the narrative by exposing the narrator to the narratees. Moreover, the movie demonstrates that the cinematic narrative has its particular plot and at the same time shows how it is communicated.

It seems that verbalisation of the movie narrative, or at least a part of it, is inevitable for a successful communication: narration is related to the viewers rhetorically. As Bohdan Nebesio (1996: 680) remarks in his research on intertitles, in the silent film era “the spoken and later the written word has always been a part of film presentation”. The speech of the characters was rendered with the help of *dialogue intertitles*, while *expository intertitles* provided various commentaries for the ongoing action (Chisholm 1987: 137). However, in contemporary cinematography, the role of the onscreen written text is much less significant compared to the pre-sound film period.

Contrariwise, Forbes shows fascination with intertitles, never doubting the power of this filmic instrument. In his adaptation, he sporadically inserts some brief remarks and exclamatory words or phrases, such as “DISASTER STRIKES!” or “CRASH!” (Fig. 1) to add a dramatic emphasis which, taking into consideration the absurdity of the story, makes the scenes even funnier. To be more precise, here the intertitles serve as means of farcical stylisation. Consider:



Figure 1. Intertitles from the movie *The Wrong Box* (Forbes 1966)

Although intertitles show an original choice to expose the cinematic narrator, yet they provide no additional information or explanation for the ongoing events which have already been rendered through the auditory and visual channels in the previous scenes. For instance, the spectators can see and hear the carriages crash, that is why the intertitle “CRASH!” may seem to be a mere repetition of information, but on an additional, i.e. verbal, level. The very fact that after the introduction of sound films were perfectly capable of narrating a story without verbal cues suggests that the adaptor did not need intertitles as an indispensable tool for the storyline construction. Yet, his creative decision was to offer the audience the pleasure of getting involved in what Neil Cohn (2016: 107) calls

“intertextual watching”, during which the information acquired a multimodal character. According to him, “the narrative structure of film uses an inherently hybrid form” (Cohn 2016: 107), hence Forbes extends the horizons of cinematic hybridity. As a stylistic element, the intertitles serve a narrative function by becoming the bearers of information employed for farcical effects. The movie displays how effectively the “minimal units of narrative are combined into meaningful[ly challenging] sequences” (Schärfe 2003: 61), in which the aesthetic interplay is evoked through the friction between the moving pictures and the static visuals: the intertitles inevitably distort the narrative flow of moving images. To say more, such technique allows to capture perceptual information by enriching the gamut of the spectators’ senses. In the case of the above discussed intertitle, it is worth remembering the broken objects and the noise audiovisually presented in the previous shot and soon afterwards the spectators being offered an emblematic frame to enjoy. Although static and mute in the context of moving images supported by soundtrack the intertitles do evoke the perception of sound by eyesight with the help of a perfectly handled design. Hence movie intertitles are not just read, the audience experience them. In *The Wrong Box*, they hit the screen as, to put it in Chaz Desimone’s wording, “elaborately hand-lettered drawings with embellishments” (DeSimone 2017) to create farcical twists. It is worth quoting David Bordwell (2013: 58) here who argues that, actually, “narratives are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver’s search for coherence”. Indeed, in *The Wrong Box*, the intertitles act as explicitly signalled funny verbal hooks to challenge the spectators’ expectations of watching a traditional serious detective story.

The silent movie era was distinguished for the adaptations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novels (cf. Buchanan 2012: 21), and R. L. Stevenson’s oeuvre was no exception. However, it was the works of Charles Dickens (1812–1870) that most frequently appeared on screen. Therefore, in order to discuss the differences between the intertitles found in Forbes’s movie and the textual commentaries employed in silent films it is reasonable to consider some intertitles from the 1910 cinematic adaptation of the most popular literary piece of the period, Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Consider:

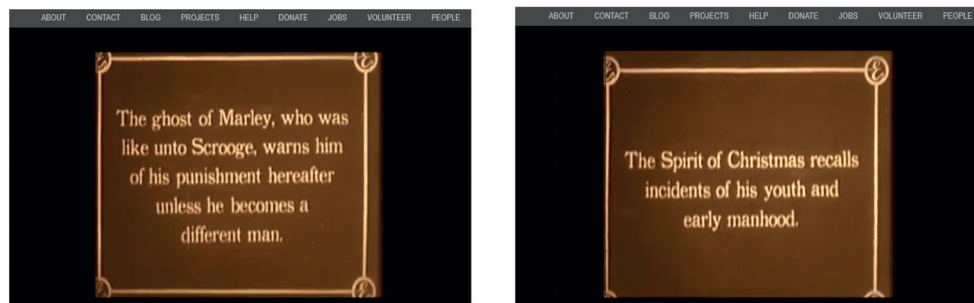


Figure 2. Intertitles from the motion picture *A Christmas Carol* (Dawley et al. 1910)



It might be claimed that the adaptor successfully merged the vintage Victorian atmosphere of R. L. Stevenson's novel *The Wrong Box* and the contemporary pop-art aesthetics of the 1960s to achieve his cinematic goal.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The second part of the article will be printed in *Respectus Philologicus* Vol. 39 (40) 2018.

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