

A Jakobsonian Approach to Film Adaptations of Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

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Film adaptation is a research area that remains surprisingly under-theorized, and motion pictures inspired from literary works are still primarily evaluated in terms of fidelity to the “sacred” originals. Scant attention is given to filmmakers’ innovative techniques, and no goals or aesthetic criteria have been clearly set for film adaptation. Yet, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jacques Derrida and others have clearly demonstrated that an “original” work is an abstract notion hard to define and virtually impossible to duplicate in film. Since it is always possible to make a film out of a novel, the controversy at the basis of film adaptation is not feasibility. The debate rests essentially on a misconception of the objectives of film adaptation and on a misunderstanding of the transformation process. What is film adaptation expected to achieve? What happens during the process of transformation? In fact, few scholars and critics have attempted to determine the criteria used to define a successful adaptation.

In 1992, in an article titled “Film (Adaptation) as Translation: Some Methodological Proposals”, Patrick Cattrysse urged scholars worldwide to expand the field of translation claiming that: “although some theoreticians try to broaden the concept of translation studies, this does not apparently happen without difficulties” (68). He concluded by adding: “there seems to be no valuable argument to keep reducing the concept of translation to mere cross-linguistic transfer processes. The scope has to be extended to a contextualistic semiotic perspective” (68). Seven years later, in an article published in the Romance Languages Annual, Millicent Marcus echoed Cattrysse’s call, arguing that: “because high-tech adaptations complicate the process of cultural recycling by moving to a different order of language –that of audio-visual spectacle—we would do well to invoke another paradigm –that of translation paradigm– to help us theorize this shift (xx). Both researchers emphasized the need to open the way to a new field of research involving inter-disciplinary studies and taking into account the common transformational process at the core of translation and film adaptation. However, to this date, there have been only few isolated attempts to link cinematic adaptation to translation theory.

The first part on of this article examines film adaptation in light of translation and semiotic theories, and explores similarities and differences inherent in both processes as an attempt to lay the foundations of an aesthetics of adaptation derived from the theory of translation. The second part of this article proposes a new approach to film adaptation and applies Jakobson's translation theory to various cinematic adaptations of *Les Misérables*.

Translation is generally seen as a binary system involving a relationship between two distinct languages. It is associated with bilingualism. Foreign language teachers, translators, interpreters and bilingual speakers readily come to our mind when we think of translation. Foreignness, difference, fear, cultural mores and customs are all imbedded in the term. Yet, the main purpose of translation is to get across a message previously not understood by a target audience, using a comprehensible language. Communication is a major factor at the origin of translation. It stems from a desire to interact with other people for a variety of reasons; economic, political, humanitarian or pedagogical. Roman Jakobson has taught us that translation can take place between distinct languages (inter-translation), between two systems of signs (intersemiotic translation) and even within the same language (intra-translation). Human beings resort to the latter type of translation when they feel the need to explain or clarify a concept, reword a complex sentence or if they want to be better understood by children, students etc. All instructors, parents, administrators, technicians, politicians, and ordinary citizens use this strategy on a daily basis to improve the communication of a message. Teachers, without exception, practice intra-lingual translation for pedagogical reasons. English, mathematics, physics and foreign language teachers alike have to use a simpler terminology to explain new vocabulary and sophisticated words. Intralingual translation is probably the most widely used type of translation worldwide.

In 1963, Jakobson defined a third type of translation—particularly relevant to film adaptation— as intersemiotic translation. This type of translation is of particular interest to us, for it involves the conversion of a particular system of signs into a different configuration. Musical, artistic and cinematic adaptations, as well as computer programming hinging on the relationship between two distinct modes of representation, all enter into this category. Intersemiotic translation may involve the

conversion of a literary text into an opera (*Carmen*), a musical (*Les Misérables*), a painting (representation of scenes taken from the Bible), or most commonly a film (*Madame Bovary*). Unfortunately, these artistic representations are typically viewed as finished products and the process of transformation, which is an essential part of their production, is often overlooked. As for film adaptations, critics frequently brand them as derivative, inaccurate and unfaithful, and little attention is given to aesthetic and innovative techniques.¹ Yet, if more studies would focus on the intermediary phase separating a literary work from its offspring as well as on the emotional, political, social and cultural environment surrounding them, we might be able to better comprehend the successive changes occurring during the process of transformation.

The great number of literary works adapted to the screen by international film directors is a testimony of the obvious mingling of literature and cinema, as well as the influence of literary works on narrative strategies of motion pictures. We should not overlook that, as soon as cinema evolved from an erratic and loosely controlled flow of life images as it was for the Lumière Brothers' films, to become sheer narrative in the mid 1900s, it often borrowed its plots from literary sources in an attempt to translate and recreate them on screen. The ambivalent nature of film adaptations that "can be seen as a kind of multileveled negotiation of intertexts" (Naremore 67) seems an appropriate point of departure toward laying the foundations of an aesthetics based on a dialectical exchange between literature and cinema. It seems that one of the major misunderstandings about motion pictures stems from their heterogeneous nature. They are made of diverse components—films are altogether written text, speech, sound, music, performance and images—and evaluating their aesthetic properties is a major challenge. Given that the term "adaptation" was first used to describe a particular mode of translation long before it was applied to cinema, we can assume that the long tradition of translation studies, spanning from Plato to Derrida, provides a helpful background for the building of a film adaptation theory.

¹ In 1965, in *La Nouvelle Revue des Deux Mondes*, Henri de Bonnechose wrote an article warning against unfaithful adaptations of Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In 1993, Judith Roof deliberately chose to include the word betrayal in the title of her article "The Betrayal of Facts: Pinter and Duras beyond Adaptation." Recently, Pascal Ifri severely criticized Raoul Ruiz' adaptation of Proust's novel in "Le temps retrouvé de Raoul Ruiz ou le temps perdu au cinéma."

Translation and adaptation share many common characteristics, but the main focus of this article is on the etymological, cultural and textual aspects of adaptation.

The first similarity that comes to mind, when comparing adaptation with translation, is semantics. Used during the Middle Ages to define a specific practice of translation, adaptation was considered as a sub-genre of translation, which became very fashionable during the 17th century with *Les Belles Infidèles*.² The same term was later applied to cinema, in 1912, to qualify the transfer from written material to visual images.

Defined by Webster as: “the act or process of adapting, fitting or modifying” as well as “the state or condition of being adapted or adjusted” (23), adaptation, like translation, is viewed both as a state and a process of transformation epitomizing a subtle blending of sameness and difference. Inspired by a literary work, but not quite equivalent to it, adaptation, whose main purpose is to bring across and to modify, claims its “differing” status from the start. As many scholars such as Douglas Kelly, Roger Zuber and Hendrick Van Gorp have demonstrated, adaptations have been very influential in the evolution of genres as well as in the renewal or recycling of previous literary works. Therefore, it would be more fruitful to view them as hybrid products containing traces of a source text rather than plain clones. Paradoxically, since adaptation suggests the existence of primary texts, it is the favorite target of a moralist discourse in search of fidelity of the film to the “original work.” Consequently, both processes are often considered as a lower form of creation that cannot escape what Barbara Folkart names the “entropy effect” or, slow degradation of an “original” work. They are hardly evaluated in terms of aesthetic creativity and originality. Their task, however, is rather significant since adaptation not only replicates a primary text but, as Walter Benjamin stressed it, they also ensure the afterlife of the original and the propagation of cultural elements contained in it.

The second significant feature shared by translation and film adaptation is at the level of a cultural transfer. As we know, adaptation or translation is more than a sheer linguistic shift since it entails the transmission and communication of “cultural capital.” In Constructing Cultures, André Lefevere stresses the major role played by

² The expression *belles infidèles* was coined by the French writer Ménége who ironically used these words to qualify the “unfaithful” translations of M. d’Ablancourt, a famous translator of the time.

translation in the dissemination of literary works and claims that: “cultural capital is transmitted, distributed, and regulated by means of translation, among other factors, not only between cultures, but also within one given culture” (41). As a process of encoding and decoding, film adaptation, much like translation, fulfills a similar task. By taking literary works to the screen, film adaptations widen the scope of their readership, offering them greater visibility. Metaphors are changed into more comprehensible images, idiomatic expressions are replaced by explicit phrases and cultural rites are explained or transposed in an effort to make them more accessible to the reader. In the process, adaptors cannot ignore the cultural background of the target culture and must “negotiate” the interaction of the audience with the source text. The trade-off between two elements –two historical periods, two cultures, two media and/or two languages—is at the core of film adaptation. Whether the transfer takes place within the same culture or between different cultures- displacement in time and/or space occurs.

Cultural references and metaphors are sometimes difficult to transfer to the screen, and they undergo significant changes during the conversion of a novel into a screenplay—first transformational step leading to the production of a film. The linguistic transfer occurring during the rewriting phase is a critical step involving a number of arbitrary decisions. The inevitable textual shift resulting from the transformation of a novel into a script is another common feature shared by cinematic adaptation and translation. Evidently, there are obvious differences between the single-track translation of a novel, which only deals with words, and the multi-track medium of cinema, which not only combines words (written and spoken), but also actors’ performance, music, sound effects and moving images. However, although translation or film adaptation deals with different media, they both involve the transformation of a source text into a target text. This can be either a text translated into a foreign language (interlinguistic translation), the rewording of a text within the same language (intralinguistic translation) or the intralinguistic or interlinguistic writing of a script. In the case of film adaptation, the process is more complex as the target text is later translated into visual images (intersemiotic translation). In some instances, such as in the Luchino Visconti’s and Harold Pinter’s ambitious adaptations of a Proust’s novel, some scripts never reach the last stage of completion and do not always undergo an intersemiotic translation. These transcripts, that were never

produced, bear witness to the textual transformation at play in the process of adaptation, as they constitute the first necessary stage in cinematic adaptation.

The kinship between film adaptation and literary translation is best illustrated through detailed analyses of films inspired from novels. In this section, several adaptations and transpositions of *Les Misérables*, produced by French and foreign directors, are used to exemplify the intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic transfers at play in film adaptation. Victor Hugo's novel, which has been translated in more than thirty languages, and adapted to the screen some thirty eight times, was chosen for its worldwide visibility and the broad array of adaptations ranging from French adaptations faithful to the time and space to Japanese transpositions taking place during the Second World War. Hugo's novel is used to support the assumption that film adaptation should not be reduced to "intersemiotic translation" but also ought to be assessed in terms of "intralingual" and "interlingual" transfers. The analysis of various adaptations and transpositions of *Les Misérables* reveals how the contrastive filmic techniques deployed by the filmmakers often coincide with specific translation techniques such as the "visibility" or "invisibility" of the translator developed by Lawrence Venuti, as well as censorship. It must be noted that the term *transposition* is used here to refer to a cinematic version displaced in time and/or space, while the generic term *adaptation* designates an adaptation faithful to time and space. When the transposition takes place within the same culture but in a time frame different from that of the source text, the process of transformation becomes equivalent to an "intralingual translation" and assumes that the writing of a classic novel script is done in the language used in the source text. For instance, a French cinematic version of *Les Misérables* is considered as an "intralingual translation" whereas a Japanese or Russian adaptation of the novel is considered as an "interlingual translation."

One striking example of a successful intralingual transfer is well illustrated by Claude Lelouch's adaptation of *Les Misérables*. In this intralingual adaptation of Hugo's novel, Lelouch draws parallels between 19th- and 20th- century societies, and shows how history repeats itself. He goes further than any other director as he reconciles fiction and reality using a distinctive narrative technique, mixing literature and cinema. Transposing *Les Misérables* to an anti-Semitic context in France during the Second World War, the filmmaker builds his motion picture on the concatenation of sequences showing a live reading of Hugo's novel, often followed by verbatim

scenes taken from the source text. Lelouch's modernist approach to film adaptation makes the process of transformation visible to the audience and suggests a pedagogical approach to literary reading, consisting in comparing literature and cinema. In the various scenes where Mr. Ziman reads *Les Misérables* to Jean Fortin, who is illiterate, Lelouch displays an intralingual translation in the making as M. Ziman retells the story in simple words easily understood by Jean Fortin. This way, the French director highlights the hermeneutical process at the core of film adaptation by breaking the process into fragmented scenes belonging to different time periods. He also incorporates other cinematic versions of *Les Misérables* in the film. Two excerpts of adaptations produced respectively by French directors Raymond Bernard and Paul Le Chanois in 1934 and 1958 are integral parts of the diegesis. This technique enables Lelouch to achieve a dialectical exchange between literature and cinema, showing that: "to interpret a text is not to give it (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it" (Barthes 5). The dialectics at play between different media appearing in the film fosters the active participation of the audience, who must reconstruct the story of Jean Fortin, using bits and pieces from various sources. The filmmaker challenges spectators to decode the adaptive process through their active participation. By making the process of adaptation visible, Lelouch illustrates Lawrence Venuti's claim that: "translation can be studied and practiced as a locus of difference, instead of the homogeneity that widely characterizes it today" (42). The conceptualization of translation or film adaptation emphasizing their differences is a significant step toward acknowledging film adaptations as autonomous works of art whose purpose is to communicate a message in a code understandable by the targeted audience.

Problems associated with the reception of a text by a foreign audience (interlingual translation) complicate the process of adaptation, as they relate to the transfer of cultural elements unknown to the targeted audience. Many questions arise and critical choices are made. The philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher summarized interlingual translation as follows: "either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader" (Biguenet 42). The first strategy focuses on the target audience and its ability to absorb a foreign culture while, in the second instance, the translator brings the reader to the text and the emphasis is no longer on the target culture but on preserving the source text. Until

recently, these one-way street strategies denying any critical interaction between reader and text have often reflected the directors' choices. They either chose to keep the story in its original context (sometimes with a few omissions) or to transpose the story to a different time or culture. Hugo's canonical work *Les Misérables* has undergone significant changes when adapted to foreign cultures. Just like "Interlingual translation" which, in the conventional sense, implies a transfer between two languages, adaptation resorts to finding equivalencies in an effort to accommodate the receiver. In a film released in 1944, by Kamâl Selim, the story is transposed to the Egyptian context of the 1940s and the main protagonist, Jean Valjean, is represented dressed in national costume in a poor Moorish café. In this appropriation of Hugo's story, the French character, whose name is orientalized, is immersed in Egyptian culture in an attempt to blend with it. If we take a look at what is happening in the field of translation at the time, we observe a similar pattern in the appropriation of Western culture in general. In an Article titled: *Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French –Arabic Translation*, Richard Jacquemond notes that during the same period, literary translation "consisted most frequently in a very free transposition of the French narrative and actually was not called 'translation' (tarjama), but 'adaptation' (iqtibas), 'arabization' (tari'ib), or even 'egyptianization' (tamsir)" (141). He also remarks that sometimes the translator neglected to mention the French author and even modified the title. Jacquemond proposes two apparently contradictory reasons for the egyptianization of French narratives: "cultural independence from the West" and "elevation of Arabic narrative to the level of its Western counterparts" (142). It seems that Egyptian translators chose to achieve their independence through the acculturation and adaptation of French literature, and this attitude coincides with film adaptation of foreign novels. There are many other examples of the sort. In 1949, a Japanese filmmaker, Daisuke Ito, transposed *Les Misérables* to 19th- century Japan. In this version of *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean is seen wearing a kimono holding a Japanese candlestick near a sleeping Buddhist monk. At this level, interlingual translation often becomes closely interwoven with intersemiotic translation through immediate visual signs such as dress and décor. These cultural transfers, often achieved through actor's costumes, tend to render the translation invisible and, to borrow a term from Lawrence Venuti, to "domesticate" the source text in order to: "give the reader unobstructed 'access to great thoughts', to what is 'present in the original'" (5). The purpose of the invisible translation is to

maintain a natural effect: “producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems ‘natural,’ i.e. not translated” (Venuti 5). But the invisible translation also deprives the targeted audience of its cultural abilities since the new text or film is presented as a domestic product. In the case of *Les Misérables*, the domestication of a foreign text entails the recycling of Western ideals such as liberty, equality and solidarity in tune with the moral or religious beliefs of the target culture.

Once we are aware of kinship between translation and adaptation, we can more easily perceive how the long tradition of translation studies constitutes a valuable tool in the aesthetic evaluation of film adaptations. The ever-growing and diversified research being conducted in the field of translation, as well as its interdisciplinary trend encompassing cultural, post-colonial, historical studies and many others, bring us layered insights. Film adaptation should be studied as a hybrid product resulting from the blending of two or more authors, cultures and audience, since it is, by definition, a dynamic and interactive process. Millicent Marcus claims that “the successful adaptation performs the process of its transit, makes explicit the way in which the literary work is passed through the filmmaker’s imagination, the new cultural context, and the technology of the medium, to emerge as a full-fledged, autonomous retelling of the tale” (xx).

If we want to better understand film adaptation, we should recognize it as a separate sub-genre of cinema that fulfills specific characteristics of aesthetics shared by translation. We should ask simple questions such as: what makes a successful adaptation? How do we define this genre? What are the main criteria? Should fidelity be invoked and to what extent? The preexistence of a source text, suggested in the idea of adaptation, leads me to consider the final product as a palimpsest in which a dialogue takes place between what is seen and unseen. Film adaptations are visible remains of an invisible process. In fact, film adaptations can be viewed as archeological artifacts, resulting from complex and intermingled transactions.

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