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Word and Image in Search of Each Other: Intersemiotic Translation of Narratives from an Intercultural Perspective

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to research the factors that influence the intersemiotic translation of cultural meanings from Russian literary narratives to their foreign cinematographic adaptations. The latter are analysed via the following parameters: narrator, audience, plot, time, space, characters, semiotic signs, logic and causality of events. The objectives are to find out: 1) how the narrative is transformed in the course of intersemiotic translation; 2) how those transformations are related to the differences between the source and the target cultures.

Keywords: narrative; intersemiotic translation; cinematographic adaptation; semiotic signs; intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Narratives are among the most important means of reflecting reality and a window to another person’s worldview. A narrator has a lot of power – the right to decide what, when and how to relate. The procedures of narrative analysis can be used to study the patterns of reality construction in a particular culture.

In the process of narration, attention is switched from reality to the way it is represented by the storyteller. Humans possess the ability to conceptualize the world through narratives; the textuality of the human mind serves as an instrument of constructing their own identity according to the laws of a fictional text (Il’in, 2001). Narratives give

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social practices form and meaning, serve as a mechanism of organizing human experience, possess social instrumentality and pragmatic potential (Lyotard, 1979).

According to M.-L. Ryan, “the founding fathers of narratology recognized from the very beginning the medium-transcending nature of narrative,” which can be realized in different forms: as myth, legend, novel and other types of fiction, drama, mime, painting, film, comics, etc. Nowadays the list can be supplemented by blogs, hypertext, and video games. As Ryan puts it, “TV, radio, film, and the internet have clearly developed unique storytelling capabilities” (Ryan).

The aim of this paper is to research the factors that influence the intersemiotic translation of cultural meanings from Russian literary narratives to their foreign cinematographic adaptations.

2. Methodology

We apply the procedures of narrative analysis to foreign screened versions of Russian classical literature in order to investigate the reconstruction of narratives from an intercultural perspective. The material includes 4 foreign films and 4 TV series (total running time 61 hrs.). We also analysed 7 Russian films and 2 TV series (total running time 38 hrs.) for the purpose of comparison.

The objectives are to find out: 1) how the narrative is transformed in the course of intersemiotic translation; 2) how those transformations are related to the differences between the source and the target cultures.

We are aware of the diversity of approaches towards narrative analysis and multiple ways in which it can be applied (e.g. see Robert & Shenhav, 2014). In this paper we study the cinematographic narratives via the following parameters: narrator, audience, plot, time, space, characters, semiotic signs, logic and causality of events. All the parameters are closely connected and interdependent, they can be separated only for the purpose of the analysis.

We are also interested in the perspective introduced by comparative narratology (Landa & Onega, 1996; Hogan, 2011), which investigates “traditions and conventions of storytelling, typology of plots and characters, migration of stories across cultures and their impact on cultural sensibilities” (Grishakova), as well as their realization in films created by representatives of different cultures (Hutchings, 2008).

3. Findings and discussion

We view the screened versions of Russian literary narratives as a result of intersemiotic translation. This notion can be traced back to R. Jacobson who distinguished intralinguistic, interlinguistic, and intersemiotic translation. Intralinguistic translation is the rewording of a verbally expressed content with the help of the signs of the same language; interlinguistic translation is done between different languages; intersemiotic translation is the interpretation of verbal signs with the help of non-verbal ones (Jacobson, 1959).

Strictly speaking, the translation from one natural language into another can be also seen as the switching between two semiotic systems. However, U. Eco remarks that translation proper is not always interpretation, whereas intersemiotic translation is an interpretation accompanied by the change of matter, which is the basic issue for any semiotic theory (Eco 2006: 283, 285). Eco regards intersemiotic translation, or transmutation, as “an interpretation by means of manipulation” (Ibid: 391).

The creation of a screened version of a literary work presupposes that part of the original text remains in the same (verbal) semiotic system and the remaining part is translated into the signs of other systems. In fact, we are dealing with the redistribution of meanings, which are further combined anew, thus forming the macromeaning of the whole. This process can be viewed as a two-step translation: 1) interlinguistic (as in most cases an adaptation is done on the bases of a translated text) and 2) intersemiotic. The transfer to a different semiotic system does not mean that verbal signs are no longer used, but their place in the system is changed, they become part of a complex network of connections between signs of different nature (Leontovich, 2011).

Narrator. In cinematographic adaptations the covert narrators are film directors who speak to the world through their interpretations of literary works. Films are by no means simple copies of the original – the directors always introduce something of their own, restructuring and recombining the meanings of the original texts. Their choices largely depend on the mechanisms typical of communication as a whole – abstracting, filtering, simplifying, associating, combining, rearranging, punctuating, filling in gaps of information, etc. This accounts for the great
difference in the interpretations of original literary texts through Russian and foreign films. We have counted at least 32 adaptations of Anna Karenina, 23 of Crime and Punishment, 14 of Brothers Karamazov and 14 of Idiot.

Narrators do not just relate the events – they explain, empathise, praise, reproach, accuse, etc., depending on their intentions. Hence all the choices and representation of the parameters discussed below. Personal choices are supplemented by cultural differences, which account for the way information is processed.

U. Eco compares transmutation to the gestures of an orchestra conductor interpreting a score (Eco, 2006, p. 302). Similarly, a book stirs the fantasy of film directors. The graphic text is devoid of intonations of oral speech, stresses and accents; it creates syntactic and other kinds of ambiguity stimulating all kinds of transformations and manipulations. But even if the director’s intention is to reproduce exactly the events and characters of the original story, it does not guarantee an adequate expression of the writer’s meanings: images and actions described in the book in a linear and consequent way, sometimes appear on the screen synchronically, thus producing a different impression.

It is not always easy to decide which of the transformations are conditioned by the narrator’s individuality, and which – by cultural differences. The analysis below is an attempt to distinguish those that can be linked to the worldview, values, mentality, and national character.

Audience. A film narrative is always a dialogue with the spectator. The director’s and the producer’s choices largely depend on the potential audience. The authors of expensive films counting on high box-office earnings have to use not only truthful, believable images, but also take into account the expectations of the public and adjust the narrative to its system of norms and values. Cinematography is a language of its own, which can be unintelligible in an intercultural context.

Hollywood narratives are based on traditional formulas, codes and conventions. They aim to entertain and please the audience by an invented story, usually with a happy end. This often contradicts the spirit of Russian classics, with its focus on human passions and sufferings. Therefore, cinematographers undertake to make changes to the original plot and characters to make them acceptable for the viewers.

The plot, especially based on real historical events, does not emerge from nowhere and disappear without trace – it is important to know a wider historical context, as well as the further flow of events. It also depends on the previous life experiences of the characters that to a certain extent explain the motives of their behaviour.

When foreign cinematographers decide that the events or actions of Russian characters are irrational and incomprehensible, they transform them to adapt the meaning to the foreign film audience. The happy end in the US adaptation of The Brothers Karamazov (1957) is definitely a tribute to Hollywood traditions: if in the Russian film Dmitry in chains trudges in the snow to Siberia and Grushenka follows him in a horse-driven sledge to the sound of dramatic music, in the American version Dmitry makes up with the father of Ilyusha (who does not die) and with the help of his brother Ivan (who is not sick), escapes with Grushenka, to the accompaniment of optimistic music. An average Western spectator cannot understand and accept Dmitry’s desire to suffer not because he murdered his father, but because he “wanted to murder,” and the Russian formula: “You cannot run away from your conscience” (Leontovich, 2011).

Time. The temporal dimensions of a screened version can also demonstrate high variability.

One of those dimensions is the correlation between two different types of time: narrative and discursive. Some films are shortened versions of the original because of the time limit; others, on the contrary, are extended. The Russian film The Dawns Here are Quiet (1972) consisted of two parts and ran 188 minutes. Chinese cinematographers (2005) sufficiently extended the film adding a great number of love scenes to make the adaptation more attractive for the audience. The TV series that enjoyed overwhelming success in China included 19 episodes and was approximately 20 hours long.

Another dimension is the temporal context of the narrative. Whereas the Russian adaptations of Idiot (1956; 2008) accurately followed the original (the action takes place in the 1860s, as in Dostoyevsky’s book), A. Kurosava placed the action of his film (1951) in contemporary time, thus changing the context and bringing the action closer to the audience.

The sequence of events can also be a matter of the narrator’s manipulations. Ralph Fiennes, who played the main part in the British–American version of Onegin (1999), recollected how the question “Who shoots first in the duel?” caused debate between him and his sister Martha, the film director. Martha wanted Lensky to shoot first and Onegin
to return fire, “but with a look of deep reluctance on his face.” Ralph found it sentimental, “a distortion or a mutation for the sake of audience satisfaction and accessibility”; he thought the poem’s portrayal of the confrontation was “far more disturbing and realistic” (Fiennes). In the end, contrary to the original, Lensky is still the first to pull the trigger.

Space belongs to the scene of action and provides a meaningful context for the unfolding of the narrative.

Some of the directors strive for a great degree of accuracy and shoot their films in the country where the action of the original narrative takes place. Onegin was partially shot in St. Petersburg. The Chinese series How the Steel was Tempered (1999) was filmed in Ukraine. Mao Weining, the Chinese director of The Dawns Here are Quiet (2005), wanted the environment to look absolutely true to Boris Vassilyev’s book. For this purpose a village was specially built on the bank of the Amur river near the Russian border, with 30 houses, a church, and ‘banya’ (bathhouse). The authenticity of the Russian landscapes in the TV series is really impressive.

However, Ralph Fiennes may be right when he remarks: “Our days in St. Petersburg were thrilling, but would an Onegin shot entirely on location have made a better film? Not necessarily. Not one scene of Dr. Zhivago was shot in Russia, and in an earlier adaptation of another Pushkin’s story – The Queen of Spades – St. Petersburg was replicated at Welwyn Studios, in North London. Constraints of money and time can fuel all the bizarre energies of cinematic artifice, giving it a reality that is more powerful because it must suggest what it cannot show” (Fiennes).

Characters. According to M. Bamberg, characters act as the exponents of the author's intentionality (Bamberg, 2012, p. 6), and it is through their actions (or inaction) that their inner world, aspirations and ideals (or lack of those) are exposed.

The appearance and its social treatment significantly influence the cultural meanings constructed in a film. It is not always clear why film-makers decide to change the characters’ looks. In War and Peace Leo Tolstoy describes Pierre Bezukhov as “a stout young man,” “fat,” awkward, looking like a bear, but in the foreign adaptations of 1956 and 2007 he becomes quite lean and not at all clumsy. In the 2007 European TV series the dark-haired and dark-eyed Natasha Rostova turns into a blue-eyed blonde, whereas the round, benevolent and clear-shaven face of Count Rostov acquires thick moustache and side-whiskers.

The understanding of beauty in general is individual and, moreover, culturally specific. Leo Tolstoy depicts Marie Bolkonskaya as a plain woman, but gives her wonderful eyes, which single her out in the gallery of other characters. In both of the foreign adaptations mentioned above she cannot be called “plain”, but there is no accent on those beautiful eyes, which is done in the Russian adaptation (1965).

In the context of Russian culture, the appearance of characters becomes a sign of its own; the accentuation of certain features learnt in high school is what we grow up with and know by heart. From the point of view of a Russian spectator, it does not allow any changes, which are seen as an offense bordering on blasphemy, as they violate the integrity and meaning of the whole work. Lensky in Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin has to have black curly hair reaching to his shoulders, and the red-haired freckled actor in the Anglo-American adaptation (1999) looks like a big joke. The same is true about the petite thin Olga, because in the poem she is “round-faced and red-cheeked like the stupid moon in the stupid sky.” Cultural associations and semantic connections are also critically important. E.g., the well-known prototype of the small and cheerful Denisov in War and Peace was the famous poet Denis Davydov, whose portrait is well-known to the Russian public, so it is strange to see him played by a very tall and serious-looking actor.

Sometimes, though, even when the appearance of a character is reproduced quite accurately, the strange thing is the expression of the face and the mimics, like the non-Russian permanent smile on the face of the old pawnbroker woman in the BBC adaptation of Crime and Punishment (1999) or Grushenka’s wide American smile in The Brothers Karamazov (1958).

Because of the intention to be loyal to the original, the Chinese film directors invited Ukrainian actors to the series How the Steel was Tempered (1999) and Russian ones to Here the Dawns are Quiet (2005). In one of the scenes of the latter series, where soldiers pledge allegiance to the red banner, there are 200 Russian actors involved.

In his Idiot (1951), A. Kurasava took an absolutely different route. All the actors are Japanese, with corresponding names: Prince Myshkin in his Japanese personification is called Kinji Kameda and Nastassiasya Filippovna becomes Taeko Nasu.

The transformation of characters is not only about the names and appearance – their inner world and behaviour also undergo serious changes. The skinhead macho Dmitry Karamazov played by the famous Yul Brynner in the
American adaptation *The Brothers Karamazov* (1958) is made less violent than the original character in order to be acceptable for the U.S. audience.

The characters’ behaviour is to a great degree dependent on the traditions, norms and conventions of the target culture. Though in some ways, especially in gender relations, Russians are more prudent than Americans and West Europeans, it turns out that they are not modest enough by Chinese standards. When the Chinese cinematographers were shooting the famous scene of *Here the Dawns are Quiet* in the Russian bathhouse, they expected the female characters to wear long chemises. When Russians explained to them that this is against the Russian traditions and people wash themselves naked, the film director wanted to give up the scene altogether. After all it was shot but was cut out of the series played on Chinese TV. However, it was shown in Russia. On the other hand, the Russian version contains only 12 episodes out of 19 because all the scenes that would look implausible for the Russian spectators were eliminated.

**Semiotic signs.** Cinematographic narrative is constructed as a complex system of semiotic elements of different nature, a configuration of iconic and symbolic signs. Its understanding requires expertise in cinematographic language, its structures, codes and conventions, such as methods and techniques of creating video and audio images, ways of building up dramatic tension, etc. Those elements are combined into meaningful code systems and largely depend on the authors’ intentions wishing to realize their artistic aims.

**Verbal signs** are used in films in sound and graphic forms. The director decides which cues pronounced by the characters in the book will be included in the film, which will be omitted and which will be added. From the point of view of the ethnic component, the choice of a language plays a great role in the expression of cultural meanings. Even when most of the film is done in the language of the target audience, it often includes passages in the original, e. g. in the form of songs, religious services, street signs, slogans, etc. which give the adaptation an ethnic flavour.

In this context a foreign accent of a character can acquire an additional meaning. E. g., the strong Russian accent in the English speech of Mikhail Kutuzov, the famous Russian military commander, in the 2007 European adaptation of *War and Peace* is probably intended to express his closeness to common soldiers.

The extreme case in terms of language use is the Chinese series *Here the Dawns are Quiet*, which was originally shot in Russian and later dubbed in Chinese, with subtitles added for the speakers of different dialects.

The use of **non-verbal signs**, such as clothes and hairstyles, is also meaningful, sometimes not in the way it was intended by the producer. For example, in *Onegin* Tatyana, a girl from an aristocratic family, appears first in a grey down shawl and then in a multi-coloured head scarf usually worn by folk women; she and her sister Olga wear plaited hair around their heads as married Cossack woman; a dancer in the theatre has a traditional Russian ‘kokoshnik’ on her head, and the courtesan visited by Onegin is wearing high red boots, all of which is most improbable. It is also not clear why at the end of the film Tatyana wears a green hat instead of the meaningful raspberry one, very well known to Russians from the quotation: “Who is that woman in a raspberry-coloured hat speaking to the Spanish ambassador?”

Music, as an indispensable element of culture and a source of powerful emotional impact, can add to the authenticity of a film or, on the contrary, prove to be alien to the fabric of the narrative. In *Onegin* the song performed by Olga and Lensky in the Larins’ early nineteenth-century aristocratic sitting-room is from the Soviet film *Don Cossacks* from the 1950s; throughout the film Onegin is haunted by the waltz associated with the Russian-Japanese War of 1904 – 1905; a boy carries a letter to Tatyana with the well-known folk song about peddlers playing at the background: “Only the dark night knows how they got along…” The famous scholar of Pushkin’s poetry, V. Nepomnyashchiy, remarks that “the landscapes and genre episodes are accompanied by the violin music with a Moldavian-Gypsy hint at something Jewish” (Nepomnyashchiy, 2002, p. 65).

An example of a **behavioural sign** acquiring an unwanted meaning in a foreign adaptation is the scene in *War and Peace* (2007), where old Prince Bolkonsky is making loud noises eating soup at lunch in his estate. The producer probably intended to show his disrespect of high society manners. But this kind of behaviour is in sharp contrast with the aristocratic origin he is very proud of, which corrupts the original meaning.

A. Kurasava demonstrated that sometimes the absence of cultural meanings is better than their presence. In his Japanese adaptation of *Idiot* he eliminated the Russian visual and symbolic components and instead placed the action into a Japanese context, which allowed him to focus on expressing the essence of Dostoyevsky’s work, its
ultimate meaning.

**Logic and causality of events.** The elements of narrative that are not expressed explicitly but are the product of interpretation deserve special attention. Cohesion and coherence are created by means of cause-and-effect and other logical connections between events or characters’ actions. Violations of logic can be meaningful and may be used by the author for manipulative reasons. The actions of the characters are induced by their aims, values and motives, which are also a product of interpretation.

Intersemiotic translation of literary narratives may include such transformations as: 1) the omission of parts of the text; 2) the signifying of the unsaid; 3) filling in the blanks; and 4) the alteration of the original (Leontovich, 2011).

Since a film has time limits, its authors inevitably have to make a serious choice: which parts of the narrative deserve to be included and which have to be sacrificed. Moreover, using U. Eco’s (2006) terms, it is possible to speak about “vertical” and “horizontal” articulation of a work. The former deals with episodes, and the latter – with its levels, e.g. with the preservation of the bare plot at the expense of deeper meanings, like in the 2007 adaptation of *Onegin* mentioned above. For Pushkin, the plot is only a frame for the expression of more important meanings, whereas in the film they are lost and the characters are greatly diminished. It is enough to mention that the commentary to the film says: “After inheriting his uncle’s country estate, playboy Evgeny Onegin travels there and meets a beautiful, passionate young girl Tatyana”.

The signifying of the unsaid is connected with the interpreter’s ability to extract deep, non-explicit meanings. E.g., the character of old Prince Bolkonsky in the European adaptation of *War and Peace* (2007) demonstrates only his outward behaviour but ignores the profound meanings – small details showing his considerate attitude to the “small Princess,” ability for silent suffering, empathy, deep inner generosity and understanding of honour. The result is a monodimensional perception, which leads to a flat, one-sided interpretation of the image.

Filling-in the blanks acquires special significance in the context of intercultural communication. In order to adapt a film to the target audience, the authors have to build a logical chain explaining the motives of the characters’ behaviour. It is often done from the perspective of the target culture and values. E.g., it is hard for an average Western spectator of *War and Peace* to understand the connection between Natasha’s “abstract” monologue on a moonlit night and Prince Andrei’s rebirth to life. Therefore, the directors of both the 1956 and 2007 adaptations bring the situation down to earth and provide a pragmatic explanation of those two events: Natasha speaks not only of her desire to fly, but also of her interest for Andrei, which developed much later in Leo Tolstoy’s narrative.

The comparison of the representations of Onegin and Tatyana’s meeting after her love letter in A. Pushkin’s original poem and its Anglo-American adaptation (*Onegin*, 1999) also shows profound cultural differences. In Pushkin’s text the communicative signal to the end of the episode is Onegin’s non-verbal action: “he held out his hand to her” (and they went back into the house). In the film Tatyana cries to Onegin: “You curse yourself!” – a phrase, which, according to V. Nepomnyashchyi (2002), is a very important episode in the film, after which Tatyana’s image acquires the features of a ‘femme fatale.’ Nepomnyashchyi further comments: “Pushkin is difficult to understand for the world at large, and the reason for it is not only the language barrier, but primarily the difference in the moral foundations. [...] Pushkin’s incomprehensible finale, is crammed with ‘the mysterious Russian soul,’ which does not know what it desires – first ‘I love you, ’then ‘I’ll be faithful to him’... Well, what is she crying about? ‘I’m crying... If you haven’t forgotten your Tatyana, then you should know that I would prefer your sharp remarks to your vexing passion, letters and tears...’ – ‘Vexing passion??? What is it all about? Why ‘I would prefer...?’ No, it is all wrong! It should be done differently, with sobbing and yelling: ‘I’m married! You are late!’ [...] This is the barrier stronger than language. The novel is written about one thing and the film is made about something totally different” (Ibid).

4. Conclusion

The study shows that authors of cinematographic adaptations of literary narratives from a different culture have to take into account such parameters as the narrator’s intention and belief system; relationship with the audience; temporal and space dimensions; the correlation of the plot with the historical and cultural reality; character’s attributes, their motives and values; background knowledge and cultural presuppositions; use of language, iconic and symbolic signs; logic and causality of events. Cultural sensitivity allows film directors to discern, on the basis of both knowledge and intuition, the presence of culturally significant meanings and make decisions about the
reliability, truthfulness and intelligibility of the resulting narrative.

Does this mean that Kurasava’s adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s *Idiot* planted on Japanese soil should be regarded as an untruthful representation? No, in this case we are dealing with a situation when a literary work becomes part of world culture and the ethnic background of characters may be seen as irrelevant. Moreover, narrators can consciously emphasize that they are dealing with universal values and therefore have the right to interpret the work through the prism of their own culture.

The analysis implies that the utmost aim of intersemiotic translation is to express the macromeaning of the original literary work. These findings may lead to their practical application in cinematography, linguistics and intercultural communication studies.

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Filmography

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*Idiot*. USSR, 1958, dir. Ivan Pyr’ev (2 parts, 116 min).

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