

**Transformation/Translation: Possibilities of adaptations**

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**Abstract**

The paper proposes to look into the transformations that occur in translation where the medium changes from print to multimedia animation with the 'text' being a popular fable. Focus is given to the signifying systems in narrative that changes its form in the process of translation. The questions of how translation of children's fables affect the translator's decisions, to what degree and in which ways are discussed. The attempt now is to identify those factors, which enable the translator to decide on the method to transform or in the process translate the traditional text into a new medium. The medium of animation still needs further probing, especially, when it does the work of transforming a verbal text. It is a polysemiotic medium that transfers meaning through several channels, such as picture, dialogue and music. Any translation is to some degree a comment on the original work, an imaginative reassessment of its possibilities.

**Keywords:** fable, narrative, animation, transferring, adaptation,

**Introduction**

Most of the studies on transformation from one textual medium to another, especially multimedia, have focused on fiction and film. The theoretical inputs on narrative, which the present study is based on, have relied on film theory. Of the four *universals*, viz., narrative films (feature films), documentaries, experimental films and animated cartoons, the presence of narrative is strong in the first and the last.

The attempt now is to identify those factors, which enable the translator to decide on the method to transform or in the process translate the traditional text into a new medium. In the present juncture, no attempt is made to find an answer to the much-debated question on the authorship of a cinematic narrative, which is problematic.

**Narrative and films**

Storytelling, they say, is as old as human civilization. The medium of film took over from the story books by the turn of the twentieth century. The study of narrative in film theory

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brings into consideration certain terms for discussion. ‘Histoire’ and ‘discourse’ in French poetics derives from the Russian formalist distinction of the 1920s between *fabula* and *syuzhet* i.e., the story material as pure chronological sequence and the plot as arranged and edited by the shaping of a storyteller. A further parallel is made in the distinction between ‘enunciated’ and ‘enunciation’. The former designates the ‘utterance’ as manifested in a stretch of ‘text’ as a coherent set of events enacted in a series of syntagmatic units, as the sum of its narrative functions. The latter, the enunciation, characterizes the process that creates, releases, shapes the utterance. Enunciation refers to the ways in which the utterance is mediated and as such obviously shares common ground with narration, *suzet* and discourse.

Neither film nor novel is ‘transparent’ however much either seeks to suppress signs of its enunciation, such ‘suppression’ being much more marked in the case of film. Films may lack those literary marks of enunciation such as person and tense, but in the ways in which for e.g. shots are angled and framed and related to each other the enunciatory processes are inscribed. Brian Mcfarlane, while discussing the phenomenon of turning novels into films, makes a distinction between narrative and enunciation. In broad terms ‘narrative’ refers to those elements of the original novel, which are transferable because they are not tied to one or other semiotic system; whereas ‘enunciation’ involves intrinsic processes of adaptation because their effects are closely tied to the semiotic system in which they are manifested (1996: 20). JakobLothe believes that film narrator is very different from the literary narrator. Film narration is an economic and effective system. As John Ellis puts it in *Visible Fictions*, film narration balances familiar elements of meaning against the unfamiliar, it moves forward by a succession of events linked in a causal chain (1989:74).

Bordwell(1985) says that film has narration but no narrator: “ narration is better understood as the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story. This presupposes a perceiver, but not any sender, of a message”. Bordwell completely bases his theory on what the viewer does when he/she sees a film. From a literary perspective it is interesting that his theory is based on the Russian formalists’ distinction between *fabula*, *syuzhet* and *style*. For him, *fabula* “embodies the action as a chronological cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field...the *syuzhet* is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film”. Crucial to Bordwell’s theory is that the *syuzhet* of film, as he sees it, only presents a small part of the total *fabula*, which is an implicit structure the viewer supports through assumptions and inferences. As the third component, *style* refers to the systematic use of cinematic devices. In contrast to *syuzhet*, which for Bordwell is a general characteristic of narrative, *style* is medium-specific or more technical.

By means of these three concepts Bordwell then presents his definition of film narration: ‘the process whereby the film’s *syuzhet* and *style* interact in the course of cueing and channel the spectator’s construction of the *fabula*’ (1985: 53). However, Chatman believes that the viewer reconstructs the film’s narrative than to say that he or she ‘constructs’ it (1990: 126).

In this context it is worth considering what animation specialists have to say on this. The term *animation* has its roots in the Latin word ‘*animere*’ or *giving life*. It speaks about the artificial illusion created by the fixed pictures and images. Norman McLaren opines that animation is not simply pictures in the move but it is the art of the dynamic movement of pictures. What happens between each frame is more important than what happens within each of them.

Paul Wells (1998) has listed the key devices of analysis in animation. They include (1) Metamorphosis (2) Condensation (3) Synecdoche (4) Symbolism & metaphor (5) Fabrication (6) Associative relations (7) Sound (8) Acting & Performance (9) Choreography (10) Penetration. The above listed features are for a general understanding regarding the structure and production of animated works and they may not figure per se in the discussion that follows.

### **Transfer and Adaptation**

To transfer a work of art from one medium to another is in one sense impossible. As Stuart McDougal puts it in *Made into Movies*: “Every art form has distinctive properties resulting from its medium; a film maker must recognize the unique characteristic of each medium before transforming a story into a film”(1985: 3). As a new and popular form of artistic production, cinema has, from its earliest days, relied on the established and ‘serious’ form of literature to provide it with cultural value. Adapting literary texts relates the new form of cinema to a universally recognized aesthetic field. Dudley Andrew identifies three basic modes of relation between film and literary text. *Borrowing* means that the artist employs more or less extensively, the material, idea or form of an earlier, generally successful text. A key question here concern artistic fertility, not the adaptation’s fidelity to the original text. *Intersecting* indicates a different attitude to adaptation: Here the uniqueness of the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation. All such works fear or refuse to adapt. Instead they present the otherness and distinctiveness of the original text, initiating a dialectical interplay between the aesthetic form of one period with the cinematic form of our period. The third mode concerns *fidelity and transformation*: Here it is assumed that the task of adaptation is the reproduction in cinema of something essential about an original text (Lothe: 2000,87). As Jakob Lothe points out this kind of tripartite distinction is that the points of transition between the three modes can be blurred, and one and the same adaptation can incorporate elements of more than one mode.

Brian Mcfarlane (1996) has cited two strategies in this process of transformation- *transferring and adaptation*. Considering the factors related to transfer, i.e., from novel to film, the narrative elements are usually taken up for distinction. Novel and film share the same story, the same ‘raw materials’, but are distinguished by means of different plot strategies that alter sequence, highlight different emphasis, which defamiliarise the story. The first level of fidelity in relation to the film version of a novel could be determined by the extent to which the filmmaker has chosen to transfer the cardinal functions of the precursor’s narrative. Macfarlane has outlined the following factors in transfer; (a) they all refer to elements, which exist at deep

levels of the text (b) they address narrative elements which are not tied (c) all are susceptible to that more or less objective treatment that eludes less stable elements (1996: 26).

Considering the aspects of adaptation, McFarlane makes use of Barthes' categorization of enunciation. The film version of a novel may retain all the major cardinal functions of a novel, all its chief character functions, its most important psychological patterns and yet, at both micro and macro levels or articulation, set up in the viewer acquainted with the novel quite different responses. The novel draws on a wholly verbal sign system, the film variously, and sometimes simultaneously on visual, aural, and verbal signifiers. In the study of adaptation, one may consider to what extent the filmmaker has picked up visual suggestions from the novel in his representation of key verbal signs and how the visual representation affects one's 'reading' of the film text (The concept of *metamorphosis* mentioned earlier comes into play in this context). Further, studies have shown the novel's distinct feature of linearity whereas the film's spatiality. The relentless linearity associated with the usual reading of a novel favours the gradual accretion of information about action, characters, atmosphere, ideas and this mode of presentation, of itself, contributes to the impression received. However, even though there seems to be some superficial similarity, frame-following-frame is not analogous to the word-following-word experience of the novel.

There are at least two significant differences to be noted: (i) the frame instantly provides information of at least visual complexity beyond that of any given word because of the spatial impact of the frame and (ii) the frame is never registered as a discrete entity in the way that a word is.

### **Language and Cinema**

One more aspect that requires a brief overview is the status of language in cinema. Unlike written narratives, it is a medium, which is not entirely linguistic. So it is curious to see how a medium that is not entirely linguistic can convey narrative. It has been asserted that the cinema has different types of languages or that many languages operate within a single film. Christian Metz (1993) says film is a complex system of successive encoded signs. He is however cautious about drawing analogies between film and verbal language. For him film is not a language but another kind of semiotic system with articulations of its own. Metz reminds that there is nothing in film that corresponds to the word in verbal language. The reason for this is that cinematic codes are not fixed, and not well organized as the codes of language. The closest we get to the verbal language notion of word in film is not the frame but the shot i.e., 'one uninterrupted image with a single static or mobile framing' (Lothe: 12-13). Metz finds that such a camera shot is at least as complex as a sentence, perhaps a paragraph. The minimal indivisible unit in film is not 'horse' but 'once there is a horse'- and then almost inevitably at the same time- 'that is jumping', 'that is white', 'by the tree' and so forth. Metz emphasizes that compared with verbal language film is a 'language' without a code. In verbal language we understand immediately what 'horse' means. The content of a camera shot is not fixed in the same way, but may on the contrary vary to the point of infinity. Thus, Metz argues, effective

camera shots are complicated and original tropes, which work on the viewer through kinetic energy and through chaining with other filmic images.

Metz has identified five physical types of signifiers in films (a) the image (b) the recorded phonic sound (c) the recorded musical sound (d) the recorded noise (e) the graphic tracing of written matters (Nichols: 586).

### **Transfer and Translation in cartoons projecting fables**

The 'translation' is done, as it has been mentioned earlier, not by a single individual but by a group. The fables such as 'Cry Wolf' have got many verbal texts and they are either fleshed up with minor additions or are rendered in the barest thread line. In the process of translation, the narrative is altered, the P.O.V is diffused, and the 'instructive' element is centralized. While exploring on the possibilities of translation, the production process of animation should be considered closely: the process of visualizing the story, sequencing of the narrative, preparation of the script, deciding on the P.O.V, fixing up of the characters in a setting, and finding the adequate voice-over shift. In the narrative of translation the *event* is fundamental rather than the performer and how it is being performed. The production process will take care of the 'individuality' of the person who does the action and the 'execution' or the way the action is done. Here the question of 'narrative' and 'enunciation' is relevant. Narrative deals with transferable elements and it can depend on the fabula.

Episode → Crisis — Fable — unresolved issue — Moral

It is a polysemiotic medium that transfers meaning through several channels, such as picture, dialogue and music. Any translation is to some degree a comment on the original work, an imaginative reassessment of its possibilities. The present attempt was only to highlight some of those possibilities based on the theoretical inputs from the studies on films.

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