EKPHRASIS AND REVERSED EKPHRASIS AS ADAPTATION PROCESSES

Lavinia HULEA
University of Petroşani

Abstract: Whether theorists call them translations, adaptations, ekphrases or reversed ekphrases, transpositions or interpretations (and the enumeration is far from exhausted), such processes, implying comparisons between media, are considered to represent a "transgenerational phenomenon" and to rely on the source text's cultural continuity and, implicitly, on its susceptibility of being further replicated in target texts. It has also been noticed that most adaptations appear to perform a shift either from a literary source towards a visual target text or vice-versa, an operation that, nonetheless, does not impose boundaries as to transpositions from and towards other media. When such adaptations are carried out from the "telling mode" to the "showing mode", the insistence on imagination is assumed to be replaced by the attention given to ocular perception, and the symbolical and conventional signs of literature are superseded by the indexical and iconic visual signs.

Keywords: ekphrasis, reversed ekphrasis, adaptation, intertextuality, relation.

Comparisons between media as well as ekphrastic impulses appear to have often been regarded as forms of adaptation and, although not always asserted as such, they were largely discussed by modern theorists, who attempted at setting forth the characteristics of the relations accordingly established. Envisaged as transposition processes, the inter-media comparisons often operate a distinction between the stuff that can be transferred from one medium to the other (the narrative) and the stuff that resents transfer owing to its belonging to different 'signifying systems'. In the opinion of Brian McFarlane, who, in his 1996 book entitled *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, focused upon the possible common grounds of literature and film, "discussion of adaptation has been bedeviled by the fidelity issue, no doubt ascribable in part to the novel's coming first, in part to the ingrained sense of literature's greater respectability in traditional critical circles. … Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering … a single, correct 'meaning' which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with." (McFarlane, 1996: 8)

It has been stressed that most adaptation criticism that embraced the fidelity issue has failed in highlighting the relationship between the literary original and the adaptation itself, which "led to a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation. It tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable – even inevitable – process in a rich culture;" (McFarlane, 1996: 10). Accordingly, while the success of the process of transposition has largely been considered as being provided by the fidelity of adaptation to its literary source, the enlargement of the theory of adaptation seem to justify two opportunities, allowing the evaluation of the resulting text: either relying upon an analysis of the intrinsic characteristics of the new artistic production or focusing on it as upon an adaptation that accurately renders the 'letters and spirit' of its literary source.

Modern criticism, in its intertextual approaches of the literary and visual fields, has gone even further in assuming that the original literary text, upon which adaptations rely, should be rather considered as a 'resource' being attributed a series of relations with the target text, depending on the extent according to which the latter one is or is not an accurate

BDD-A22058 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:50 UTC)

development of the source text. Yet, the interference between the literary and the visual involves a multi-level relational typology displaying various connections, among which "fidelity is only one – and rarely the most exciting." (McFarlane, 1996: 11)

The sets of terms employed with a view of asserting such intertextual pursuits display a worth-mentioning variety centered upon the differentiation "between a series of events sequentially and *con*sequentially arranged and the modes (more easily distinguishable in literary terms) of their presentation." (McFarlane, 1996: 19) From 'narrative' and 'narration' to 'enunciated' and 'enunciation' via 'story' and 'discourse' or 'story-matter' and 'manner of delivery', all these distinctions appear to operate a fundamental separation between those elements that can be assumed to represent a 'transferable' stuff from the literary source text to the visual target text and those requiring 'adaptation' owing to their being intimately determined by the semiotic system of the source text.

Although the literary source text plays a relevant part in the designing of the target text, it is, nonetheless, considered not to be the sole determiner of the latter one; accordingly, intertextuality brings about the analysis of those non-literary factors – the cultural milieu or the social context – capable of shaping the 'identity' of the target text.

As, according to the fidelity approach, the resulting target text mainly performs a sort of 'copying' of the source text, adaptations that explicitly deviate from the original should be reconsidered in terms of "offering a *commentary* on or, in more extreme cases, a *deconstruction* … of the original." (McFarlane, 1996: 22)

More recent theories, such as the one displayed by Linda Hutcheon's book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, assert that an adaptation may be regarded "as a creative and interpretative transposition of a recognizable other work or works", which comes to be perceived as "a kind of extended palimpsest" requiring a "transcoding into a different set of conventions" (Hutcheon, 2006: 33). Such considerations set forth a series of factors that might bring their contribution to the process, both separately and collectively; consequently, adaptations may generally be viewed as a rewriting of an existing work that involves the reinterpretation of that work; nonetheless, the change of method or style determines certain modifications, while the new medium engenders other differences that come out of the specific material of the two media that ultimately regards non-identical narrative modes (Hutcheon, 2006: 34).

While both MacFarlane and Hutcheon agree that a target text relying on a literary source text must reinterpret the source text and not only reproduce it, their theoretical approach differs in terms of alteration of the source text: where McFarlane sees the target text as entirely different, Hutcheon implies that the source text continues to be recognizable within the target text.

Despite the fact that such ekphrastic processes have become largely familiar within the cultural context of the twenty-first century, transpositions were, at times, regarded as inferior and criticized for their having degraded the literary source. Hutcheon, for instance, citing Virginia "comfort and Woolf's references to cinematographic art, observes "the simplification of the literary work that inevitably occurred in its transposition to the new visual medium" (Hutcheon, 2006: 3), but insists that adaptations strive to explicitly assert their connection to the literary sources they refer to. And she goes further in noticing the omnipresence of adaptations, which is attributed to the enjoyment deriving from "the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change." (Hutcheon, 2006: 4).

Dealing with adaptations as "products", theoretical approaches (Hutcheon, 2006: 7) set forth the concept according to which adaptations represent declared and wide-ranging "transpositions" of a certain work, determining a change of medium, genre or context. Meanwhile, its perception as a "process of creation" turns adaptation into a two-fold

BDD-A22058 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:50 UTC)

development relying on "(re-)interpretation" and "(re-)creation", while necessarily referring to the source texts and preserving the narratives.

Finally, adaptations as "processes of reception" become "a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations)* as palimpsests through or memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation." (Hutcheon, 2006: 8) While a widened definition of adaptation induces the perception according to which all past works belonging to the cultural heritage can bear transformation and recreation, defining adaptation as process and product comes closer to the general acceptance and engenders considerations upon a wide range of source and target texts, including visual art transpositions of literary works.

It is interesting to notice that transpositions may be assumed to allow a variety of forms or expressions (congruent with specific media); yet, the "content" to be transposed from a medium to another is identified, by the majority of theorists, as a "denominator" that transcends media and genres as well and comes to include "the various elements of the story: its themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on." (Hutcheon, 2006: 10)

While practice seems to infer that themes appear as the most easily adaptable elements, the story, at its turn, may determine double-sided transpositions, which either follow truthfully the original source text or alter dramatically plot, time, point of view, initial assertions or conclusions, etc. As far as the source text's capability of being adapted is concerned, theorists (Hutcheon, 2006: 15) assume that the degree of adaptability differ from text to text, and while realist novels, for instance, are most effortlessly subject of transpositions (at least, for cinematographic adaptations), other literary sources (Joyce, Becket) are simply reluctant to media trans-crossing.

Characters frequently come to represent essential elements of transpositions owing to their central status in the source texts and to the specific interest audience manifests towards them. Murray Smith, in his book *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, develops a concept focusing on the spectator's attention toward the film characters that basically develops according to three levels: "recognition", which regards the spectator's outlining of characters grounded upon the hints in the text; "perceptual alignment", emphasizing the mechanism owing to which the spectators relate to the characters; and "allegiance", which gives an insight of the spectator's engagement with the character's values and ethical standpoints. Smith's approach sets forth a significant assertion that appears to explain the particular relation between audience and characters: while, on the one hand, the first two levels of the audience's commitment require the understanding of the character's traits and modes of being, the third level involves a compulsory assessment of those characteristics, which determines the emotional reaction of the spectator. (Smith, 1995: 81-6)

Although the analysis has been undertaken in relation with film characters, implying that audience's sympathy for or rejection of a character relies on a realistic development grounded on the judgment and possible matching between the character's actions and its moral and ideological principles, it may clear up the response certain literary characters determine in the artists, who choose to turn them into visual art icons.

Transpositions from one medium to another have often been compared with translations, prioritizing the supremacy of the source text over the target text together with the latter one's impulse towards strict observance of and similarity with the transposed text. Nonetheless, twenty-first century theorists of translation theory, such as Susan Bassnett or Edwin Gentzler, propose a redefinition of the relational terms between texts and languages, which emphasizes the perception of translation as "mediating between cultures" owing to its being the equivalent of "a rewriting of an original". Accordingly, "the two most important shifts in theoretical developments in translation theory over the past two decades have been

BDD-A22058 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:50 UTC)

(1) the shift from source-oriented theories to target-text-oriented theories and (2) the shift to include cultural factors … in the translation training models." (Bassnett, 2007: 14-5)

It may then be inferred that process of translating involves the forging of "a new original in another language" and is turned into an "act of both inter-cultural and inter-temporal communication" (Bassnett, 2002: 9) able to "expose the relationship between the … cultural systems in which those texts are embedded." (Bassnett, 2007: 19) In doing this, translation may be regarded as manifesting attributes in common with adaptation, ekphrasis, and reversed ekphrasis processes. While translations cease to be regarded as mere reproductions, adaptations and ekphrastic processes may be understood as a particular type of translation, which imply a change of medium and signs.

While perceiving adaptation as a process, theorists also pinpoint that such a conditioning determines in fact two fundamental operations, interpretation and creation that rely upon a process of "appropriation, of taking possession of another's story, and filtering it, …, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents." (Hutcheon, 2006: 18) The connection with ekphrasis and reversed ekphrasis processes may easily follow as both processes demand a reading of the source text.

Accordingly, adaptations or ekphrastic processes, which rely on transposers' creativity in order to be successful, may develop, in the opinion of Andre Bazin, along two central principles: they should 'represent' the story of the literary source text and also add something new, which might engender a new understanding of the source text: "More important than… faithfulness… is knowing whether the cinema can integrate the powers of the novel… and whether it can, beyond the spectacle, interest us less through the representation of events than through the comprehension of them." (Bazin, 2002: 7) According to the film critic and theorist, adaptations rely upon the literary source texts in that they consider their narrative elements which they transfer to a different medium while attempting at giving the audience a new understanding of the initial source text.

At this point, it is perhaps worth-mentioning Linda Hutcheon's considerations on the manner audience engages with the various media, which derives the three "modes of engagement" (telling, showing, and interacting) that also enables a better focusing upon the possible connections between source and target texts. Such "modes of engagement" are acknowledged to be the result of a particular time and space delimited within a certain type of society and cultural milieu, while both creation and reception (and through extrapolation, all adaptation) are tangible, material, public, and economic to the same extent to which they belong to culture, aesthetics, and private sphere.

"In the telling mode – in narrative literature, for example – our engagement begins in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text and liberated – that is, unconstrained by the limits of the visual… .We can stop at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel, as well as see, how much of the story remains to be read. But with the move to the mode of showing, …., we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception – with its mix of both detail and broad focus. … A consideration of the differences between the modes of engagement of telling and showing, however, suggests quite the contrary: each mode, like each medium, *has* its own specificity, if not its own essence. In other words, no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each has at its disposal different means of expression – media and genres – and so can aim at and achieve certain things better than others." (Hutcheon, 2006: 22-4)

Whether theorists call them translations, adaptations, ekphrases or reversed ekphrases, transpositions or interpretations – and the enumeration is far from exhausted – such processes are considered to represent a "transgenerational phenomenon" relying on the source text's cultural continuity and, implicitly, on its susceptibility of being further replicated

BDD-A22058 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:50 UTC)

in target texts. It has also been noticed that most transpositions appear to perform the shift either from a literary source towards a visual target text or vice-versa, an operation that, nonetheless, does not impose boundaries as to transpositions from and towards other media. When such transpositions are carried out from the "telling mode" to the "showing mode", the insistence on imagination is assumed to be replaced by the attention given to ocular perception, and the symbolical and conventional signs of literature are superseded by the indexical and iconic visual signs.

Theoretical approaches of adaptation consider that an analysis of both source texts and target texts should observe the relevance of the context: while there are no context-free texts (owing to conditioning parameters, such as being incorporated within a certain culture or having been created during a certain period of time), value systems (upon which reception theories rely) are also part of the same context-dependent equation:

"Just as a painting changes when it is moved from the Eastern end of a church and placed in an art gallery, so a play by Shakespeare, or an opera by Mozart, changes its character according to the physical format in which it is presented. A play that started the theatrical life on an unfurnished platform at the Globe and then went on to be pictorially represented in the Victorian theater, with further alterations in physical format when thrust on to the apron stages that developed after the 1950s, has undergone changes that are just as far reaching as the ones that result from reinterpretations of the spoken lines." (Miller, 1986: 60)

Media, time, and space are three of the most representative contexts relating to adaptations: when, for instance, a story is told, shown, or interacted with, it concomitantly develops within a definite time and space that are part of a larger cultural context, which, at its turn, bears the imprint of a particular social environment. Further, the transcultural shift, operating when adapting from one culture to another, may involve changes of meaning, which, at times are intended to eliminate the breach determined by cross-cultural perception differences or by time-shaped incompatibilities originated in the temporal gap between the creation of the source text and the creation of the target texts. It has also been pointed out that, while adapters are always appointed a precise context within which their work becomes meaningful, nonetheless, meaning may change over time. Under such circumstances, it is important to notice that temporal relevance not only regards the context of adaptations but also the context of their reception, which, at their turn, are related with the adapted source text.

Shaped as they are by cultural contexts, adaptations are, nonetheless, considered to come out of "what we might, …, call the adaptive faculty", which " is the ability to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity, to be at once both self and Other." (Hutcheon, 2006: 174) In the end, the repetition of adaptation seems to be related with our perception of the narrative, whose definition identifies it both as a particular cultural portrayal of a fundamental ideology and as a common human characteristic.

Despite the emphasis on adaptations' capacity of repeating "without copying", other theories having approached either the verbal transpositions of visual representations or the visual transpositions of verbal representations appear to set forth the "paragonal" characteristic of both literary and visual ekphrasis. It has also been emphasized the fact that the two "sister arts" determine a so-called "representational friction" that comes out whenever specific art media are supposed to overcome their intrinsic limitations.

The analyses of adaptation, ekphrasis, reversed ekphrasis, transposition, etc. are too often centred upon a relation between the two arts seen as a competition (originated in the century-old notion of mimesis) and dominating most approaches that regard the hereby processes. Such a contest usually results in a hierarchy that grants superiority either to the realm of the art word or to that of the visual art.

BDD-A22058 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:50 UTC)

The examination of the numerous theories approaching the possible connection between literature and arts clearly shows a continual determination to declare the superiority of either the verbal art or of the visual art. Nonetheless, a far more important and lucrative evidence appears to be the fact that reversed ekphrastic processes are similar with ekphrastic ones, and ultimately with adaptations, and all of them depend upon a relation developing either between a visual art source text and a literary art target text or between a literary source text and a visual target text. In consequence, the construction of a hierarchy involving the two types of texts exhibiting relational terms seems to be less suitable for the examination and significance of the dual condition (as works of art and as conversions of visual source texts or of literary source texts) of the literary or visual target texts. On the contrary, in spite of the countless definitions, innumerable terms, and controversial hierarchies, it should be stressed that reversed ekphrastic processes are equivalent with ekphrastic processes, emphasizing a distinctive relation between the word art and the visual art.

Bibliography

Bassnett, Susan. 2007. "Culture and Translation" in *The Companion to Translation Studies*, edited by Piotr Kuhiwczak and Karin Littau, Multilingual Matters Ltd., Clevedon, Buffalo.

Bassnett, Susan. 2002. *Translation Studies*. Routledge, New York.

Bazin, Andre. 2002. "M. Ripois, with or without nemesis", trans. Bert Cardullo, in *Literature/ Film Quarterly*, vol. XXX, No. 1, Salisbury University, Salisbury, http://www.salisbury.edu/lfq.

McFarlane, Brian. 1996. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic84566.files/).

Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, New York, London.

Miller, Jonathan. 1986. *Subsequent Performances*. Faber and Faber, London.

BDD-A22058 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:03:50 UTC)