

INTERMEDIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN AN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of modern epochal changes and the development of high-tech processes, our research focuses on intermedial transformations in an intercultural context, a topic which is gaining increasing importance today. This primarily includes literary film adaptations. Such adaptations are no longer confined to the process of converting a narrative text into visual imagery. It has become commonplace for a work created within one cultural system to be revived within another, breathing new life into it or at least manifesting loyalty to the original. This creates intercultural dialogue, where linguistic, ideological, narratological and aesthetic systems collide. When a text created in one linguistic space is transferred to another cultural context and transformed into cinematic language, a process of reevaluation of symbols, values and cultural memory begins.

Additionally, modern cross-cultural adaptations push the text beyond linguistic, aesthetic, and ideological boundaries, creating new interpretive spaces and cultural codes. Intercultural film adaptations of literature not only adapt the content, but also introduce new textual and cultural codes. This is due to functional and structural changes in characters, themes and symbols according to cultural norms, cinematic conventions and social context.

Thus, the adaptation process is perceived as one of interpretation and recontextualisation. Analysing intercultural film adaptations of literature reveals that film does not have the power to directly adopt certain literary forms (e.g. interior monologues or narrative instances) without changing them, and must therefore develop its own visual and narrative strategies.

Ultimately, the intercultural adaptation of literature is understood as a creative compromise between fidelity to the original text and culturally conditioned adaptation. The focus is on the productive differences that arise from media and cultural changes.

Keywords: Film Adaptation; Literary Adaptation; Interculturality, Intermediality; Transformation.

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Introduction: In the modern era, the process of adapting a literary work for the screen has become more complex, involving more than simply transferring a narrative from one medium to another. In an intercultural context, this process frequently involves integrating the text into a new cultural environment and rethinking and transforming it. Consequently, a multilayered dialogue is established between different cultural systems. Notably, intercultural film adaptations represent not only the content of the original text, but also create new meanings conditioned by the social, historical, and aesthetic context of a particular culture. During the transformation process, changes in narrative structure, values and symbols often occur, ultimately forming new cultural codes.

The aim of this paper is thus to analyse intermedial transformations in an intercultural context, with a focus on film adaptations of literary texts as a specific type of intercultural dialogue and representation of meaning.

A review of extant literary sources and methodology: Within the framework of the study, we deemed it appropriate to conduct a comparative analysis. The emphasis will be placed on intermediality and the similarities and differences revealed by transformation, drawing on the work of German researchers. Irmela Schneider's work on the processes involved in transforming a literary text into a film is particularly noteworthy.

Discussion and Results: The process of adapting a literary text for the screen is a long one. These processes are precisely what Irmela Schneider, a German researcher of intermediality and transformation, is studying. Literary texts are characterised by verbal language codes, whereas films are characterised by cinematic codes. However, as the author notes, these are not the only codes that literary texts or films have; we may also encounter a combination of codes. This creates an apparent opposition between form and content. A text can be expressed in various forms (Schneider, 1981: 134, 135). Furthermore, if the representation space changes, so will the expression method and the code. There is a distinction between language-specific and non-language-specific codes. "It is better not to decipher codes at the level of assumptions, but rather to provide the knowledge with which the codes can be understood" (Schneider, 1981: 147). In the process of transformation, it should be clear that the film has different forms of expression, and that the language-specific codes derived from the text should be transformed into the film in a way that reflects their presentation in the literary text. However, in the case of combination, they should be translated using different codes. A specific analysis shows how non-linguistic codes should be activated directly in the literary screen adaptation and how they will be encountered in relation to and in combination with different codes (Cf. Schneider, 1981: 148).

Schneider explores the relationships between the viewer (recipient), the narrative process and the author of the film, as well as the relationship between camera action and *mise-en-scène*. However, it becomes clear that the system of relationships formed in a literary text between the author, the narrative process and the recipient cannot be the basis for a direct comparison between literary and cinematic narrative, since the communicative situation changes significantly in the transformation process.

When considering the form of narration, particular attention is given to temporal aspects, such as the order, frequency and duration of events. Additionally, Schneider considers the potential substantive analogies between literary narrative and its cinematic adaptation (Cf. Schneider, 1981: 266-269).

Literature, texts, films and other media carry cultural representations and codes that play a crucial role in cultural transformation processes. Through these carriers, traditions, beliefs, symbols and perceptions of the 'other' and the 'self' are formed and disseminated. At the same time, they lay the groundwork for practical intercultural interaction and can be strategically employed in this context (Cf. Ndong, 2019: 167 in: Doris Bachmann-Medick, 1996: 8).

When discussing film adaptations, transformation processes and intermediality, it is worth noting that we are also referring to the connection between narrativity and intermediality. It could be argued that different media, such as film, literature and music, possess the fundamental characteristic of narrativity (Cf. Daume, Bosée, 2020: 59 in: Wolf, 2014: 24, 38).

Therefore, narrativeness is a transmedia phenomenon since it is not directed at a specific medium and can be presented in various ways within a given medium.

Nevertheless, the shared narrative characteristics of media create special possibilities for intermedial references. This means that a particular narrative medium can exploit the narrative potential of other media.

However, it should be noted that intermedial relations and the combination or transformation of media most often lead to a transformation of the narrative (Cf. Daume, Bosée, 2020: 59).

We have selected the novella "Letter from an Unknown Woman" by the German writer Stefan Zweig and the American film of the same name by the director Max Ophüls, widely considered to be one of his best works, for analysis. During the analysis and discussion, we will refer to the views of the German researcher Von der Lühe.

The film has a clear structure characterised by three key episodes dedicated to three different stages in the life of the main character, a woman whose identity remains unknown. The narrative perspective alternates between a first-person narrator and an authorial narrator; Zweig's text is read off-screen at various points. The film's plot differs significantly from Zweig's narrative in various ways. Unlike in the text, there is no longer an unnamed character; in the film, we meet her as Lisa. Rather than a writer, the film introduces the pianist Stefan Brand, whom Lisa has loved throughout her life. The leitmotif of rejected and hopeless love is intensified by the music, which contributes significantly to creating a melodramatic atmosphere.

The film is set in Vienna and Linz towards the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The monarchy is affected by the political events of the time. The film's plot differs significantly from Zweig's original text. In the film, the main character, Stefan Brand, and his fate are relegated to the background. At the beginning, he is challenged to a duel for reasons that are unclear to the audience. Brand tries to avoid the duel by running away, but becomes so engrossed in reading a letter from an unknown woman that he loses sight of the present moment and becomes lost in memories of the past. The film's narrative then begins with a flashback¹. Lisa's life and her love for Stefann Brand find themselves caught up in the events. The story begins with Lisa and her family moving from Vienna to Linz. Here, too, the film's narrative departs from Zweig's text, in which the family moves to Innsbruck. Years later, despite the prospect of a favourable marriage, Lisa refuses a comfortable life and chooses independence.

The heroine's attempts to get closer to Stefan Brand are initially unsuccessful until they finally meet one winter's evening. However, Brand fails to recognise her, further highlighting the emotional distance between them.

The film's main plot is the challenging circumstances faced by the expectant mother and the humiliation she experiences in the maternity ward, as vividly described by Stefan Zweig. In the film, the nurse's mention of the mother and child's names reveals their anonymity and secrecy. To ensure that the child has a life befitting her status, Lisa marries the wealthy, much older Johann Stauffer. Other aspects are added to the film from the author's text and plot, such as the scene in which the unknown woman refuses to marry the elderly count or the young Brno merchant.

The fate of the main female character in Ophüls' film is sealed during a visit to the opera, a pivotal moment in terms of both narratology and symbolism. During this scene, intertextual references to W. A. Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* are included, in which the main character initially fails to recognise her lover. This further intensifies the leitmotif of not recognising the beloved, which completely determines the dynamics of the main characters' relationship.

In terms of genre, Letter from an Unknown Woman has all the characteristics of a classic melodrama²,

¹ A flashback is an artistic device, mainly used in cinematography, which temporarily interrupts the narrative sequence to show events from the past. In literary studies, the literary equivalent of a flashback is considered to be a retrospective. The opposite of 'looking into the future' in a story is called a 'flashforward'.

² This dramatic genre emerged in 18th century France and is characterised by exaggerated emotionality and moralising sentences. It combines intense intrigue with sharp contrasts between good and evil. Melodrama became firmly established in so-called soap operas.

dealing primarily with emotions, emotional conflicts, repressed desires, and unrequited love.

Director Ophüls employed all the visual techniques typical of melodrama to depict the emotional world of the characters. Extreme lighting, such as contrast lighting, the play of shadows and the effects of light and darkness, creates psychological tension and visualises the characters' internal conflicts. Frequent camera movements, such as changes of shot, tracking shots and extreme angles and views, highlight the dramatic nature of the plot. The magnificent interior of the Vienna Opera House and the opulent setting of Lisa's husband's house, along with the other scenery on the set, create the "melodrama style" characteristic of Ophüls' films, which allows for impressive acting performances by the main characters.

The film focuses on Lisa and pianist Stefan Brand, who find themselves at the mercy of fate. The film opens with the depiction of the deaths of Lisa and her son Stefan, as well as Brand's seemingly inevitable death in a duel. Thus, as well as showing Lisa's unrequited love, the film depicts Brand, a concert pianist with a weak and fragile character. The self-sufficient, superficial child prodigy is unable to continue his career in adulthood, as hinted at by photographs and posters in the film. Unlike Zweig's protagonist, the pianist in the film does not approach his profession with full seriousness and responsibility. In the film, the "Unknown Woman" is portrayed as a determined individual who successfully overcomes social and economic challenges. Unlike in Zweig's text, in Ophüls' film we see not a marginalised, helpless woman, but a respected figure integrated into society.

Thus, in relation to the literary text, the film clearly highlights different thematic elements: while Zweig criticises imperial and royal Austro-Hungarian society, and the life of the "unknown woman" is confined by conventions and ultimately rejected due to her profession, Ophüls stages a melodrama in which the fate of the main characters seems predetermined and ultimately leads to a tragic ending. Ultimately, a strong-willed woman, Lisa, meets a fragile man, Stefan (Cf. von der Lühe: 378–384).

Conclusions: From Stefan Zweig's perspective, *The Unknown Woman* is an example of a socio-psychological tragedy in which the fate of the protagonist is closely connected to the social norms and gender hierarchy of the time. Due to her lifestyle and social status, the female protagonist is marginalised. In the film, the fate of the Unknown Woman and her lover Stefan Brand leads to irreversible tragedy: they are both sentenced to death. Musical motifs from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Wagner's *Tannhäuser*³ hint at the film's leitmotifs.

While Papageno's aria represents the tragic 'non-recognition' of the lover and the sad fate of the "unknown woman", Wagner's aria "O Du mein Abendstern" (Oh, my evening star/Venus) points to the motifs of unrequited love and the vain waiting of the lover, which ultimately leads to their death. This creates a sharp dichotomy between idealised, "pure" love and the dishonest, worldly love that accompanies the work of Stefan Zweig (Cf. von der Lühe: 393).

Zweig's "Unknown Woman", the protagonist sacrifices herself for the love that has defined her life. Through her letter, the writer opens her eyes to a different world where love is an idealised experience that transcends time and death. In the text, love thus takes on a disembodied, idealistic form associated with Platonic or transcendental ideas in various cultures.

For Stefan Zweig, the "Unknown Woman" is a redemptive figure — a woman who embodies sacred and immoral love. In the film adaptation by director Max Ophüls, the deaths of the main characters, Lisa and Stefan, symbolise an unattainable love. Both of their lives are shattered by the moral concepts and conventions of Viennese society at the turn of the century.

The predictable death in the pianist's duel marks a clear departure from Zweig's narrative, affecting the

³ Tannhäuser (German: Tannhäuser or Tanhäuser) was German Minnesinger and travelling Poet from the late Middle Ages.

meaning of the entire plot. Unlike in Zweig's *Stranger*, the unknown woman, represented by the main character Lisa, recognises the unworthiness of "love object" and the failure of her love through her writing, which can also be understood as a metaphor for regret.

The film can be seen as an embodiment of cultural transfer within the American context of Western culture. It features a strong, emancipated woman who contrasts sharply with the traditional passive or victimised characters of classical European melodrama.

In Ophüls' film, the city of Vienna takes on special significance, with urban spaces, city streets, squares, buildings and the backstage area of Universal Studios all playing a role. The characters and spaces of action are visual projections of emotional states, condensed into landscapes or attractions that offer us the boundless possibilities of the film industry.

In the film *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the director used atmospheric music to create a charming yet fragile "fin de siècle"⁴ Vienna setting. Together with cinematographer Planer, he presents the viewer with an idealised vision of "old Vienna", complete with coffee houses, opera and theatre, and the greatest tragedy of all: love. Influenced by Stefan Zweig, Ophüls criticises the concepts of morality and dignity that dominate power-based Viennese society, a society confined and frozen within rigid frames and conventions. The film, especially in the second half, portrays a dark, mysterious Vienna — a labyrinthine city where death lurks around every corner (Cf. von der Lühe: 385).

Ophüls depicted the dark side of the city in the "film noir"⁵ style, which developed in the United States under the influence of German expressionist silent films. Characterised by urban settings, morally ambiguous protagonists, a dark mood and often negative endings, film noir frequently employs flashbacks and voice-over narration. Examples of this can be seen in Ophüls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Flashbacks and "voice-over" narration, where only the narrator's voice is heard but not seen, are narrative techniques often used in film noir, and are important elements in Ophüls's films.

Noir films often raise questions about morality, prompting audiences to reflect on their own values and principles. The characters in these films often find themselves grappling with moral dilemmas. Film noir is largely set in urban environments, particularly large cities and megacities. These urban landscapes are typically depicted as dark, dirty and depressing (Cf. von der Lühe: 385).

The director deliberately chose to shoot the film in black and white to highlight the tragic fate of the "Unknown Woman", while high-contrast lighting and sharp contrasts of shadows and light vividly depict the main character's emotional instability and fragility.

The film is a complex synthesis of cinematic conventions from that era and is based on Stefan Zweig's novella *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. The film remains relatively faithful to the literary text while offering a specific, autonomous cinematic language.

⁴ Fin de siècle (French for "end of the century") is a term used to describe the events that characterised the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in European cultural history. This period was characterised by decline and a new beginning.

⁵ So, what is "noir"? Some call it a genre, while others call it a style. The dark streets of a big city, the interplay of shadows on the screen, the bleak existence of the protagonists and the femme fatales – these elements, in the mid-20th century, gave rise to a whole trend in cinema. The term "film noir" ("black film") is used in film criticism. Initially, it was used to classify cynical and pessimistic American crime films from the 1940s and 1950s. In German-speaking countries, they were known as the "black series". Film noir plots usually revolve around anti-heroes who are often characterised by immoral actions and described as outcasts "saturated with existential crisis". Archetypal film noir characters include the femme fatale, corrupt police officers, jealous husbands and fearless insurance agents. The femme fatale is one of the characters most often associated with film noir.

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