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Adaptation as Intermedial Dialogue, or Tennessee Williams Goes to Hollywood

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The dominant discourse on film adaptation today is based on the highly problematic notion of “fidelity”: whether the artistic achievement in literature is the same in the cinema, and thus whether the “message” is violated or not. Focusing on such questions, this method cannot tackle issues relating to medial difference, which is pivotal concerning the transition from literature to film. The issue becomes the most problematic when the topic of “literature and film” concerns the adaptation of drama to film (an essentially narrative medium). Tennessee Williams and his works become relevant at this point: he worked both as a scriptwriter and also as a playwright, achieving success in both realms. The essay aims to look at his strategies in bridging what might be called the “medial break” between two (or more) media in a productive way for the contemporary theoretical arena in adaptation studies.

When one is to talk about the film adaptation of a literary text, the easiest or most convenient thing to do is to make a list of differences between the two texts, on the basis of which one can compare and contrast their artistic achievement. This way one engages oneself – however implicitly – in the discourse on “fidelity:” that is, whether a film adaptation is faithful to the original or source text, or – on the contrary – fails to transmit the “sacred message” of the original. Easy as it is, and indeed dominating in film criticism, this approach is utterly problematic. The issue of fidelity may take up two separate lines of argumentation, *fidelity to the letter* and *fidelity to the spirit* of the original. The first does not take into consideration medial differences, the second fails to account for the differences of reading experiences. Very simply put, how is an audio-visual medium to render the letters other than transforming them into images and sound? Or how is a film to present just any reader’s fantasy, or reading experience of a literary text? If one accepts that the only possible answer to these quite trivial questions is that there is “no way” for the literary and the filmic texts to *be the same*, then it becomes clear that there is a need for a different approach.

But before even attempting to tackle the issue, let me complicate things a little. When in the academia we mention the study of film adaptation, we implicitly mean the study of the transition from the novel to the film, implying a somewhat easy road, the foundation of which is *the common aspect of narrativity* in terms of the two media. To make the inherent yet sutured gap insisting at the very center of the field of “literature and film” explicit, I wish to turn to the problem of film adaptations of dramas. This way, I may dispense with the issue of “narration as a bridge” between the media that may also be used to smooth theoretical incompatibilities and contrasts that are explicit in the case of a dramatic and a narrative medium. Obviously, I signal by this a problem of the entire field of literature and film: while it homogenizes literature and means narrative, it uses the specific genre of fiction film to stand for the cinema.

Instead of going on to recount and criticize the problems present in the critical-theoretical discourse on film adaptation, I wish to offer an alternative approach. Far from drawing a consistent or rigid framework, I wish to utilize the very breach or break that separates drama and film in order to lay down the foundation of a dialogue that reveals as much about the adaptation as it does about the so-called source text. As I will prove through the example of Tennessee Williams, such a venture postulates that I disregard the hierarchy of texts imposed by their birth (which of course does not mean overlooking specific historical and cultural contexts, only these are parts of the interpretative stance, and not its premise). In other words, what matters for me at this point is to see what one text reveals about the other when they are engaged in a dialogue through the prism of the medial break between them, and what the interpreter can learn of this interaction. The juxtaposition and interaction of drama and film in this presentation is what I call the intermedial dialogue.

I have chosen Tennessee Williams because his work cannot be limited to the field of literature (drama, short story and novel), as he also took part in writing scripts for films, more precisely, film adaptations of his literary texts. By doing so, he himself established an intermedial dialogue, and my task is to trace that by “reading” his texts (both dramatic and filmic) simultaneously.

Here I wish to explain why I insist on the use of *dialogue*, what I hope to gain by working with it, and why I have chosen not to retain Kristeva’s translation and transformation of the concept as “intertext” and “intertextuality.” According to Bakhtin, the term *dialogue* denotes “the necessary relation of any utterance to other utterances” (Stam 1992: 203). This definition emphasizes the interactive nature of any given text as an utterance necessarily and inevitably entering into dialogue with other texts and utterances. Furthermore, any verbal (or non-verbal, for that matter) performance “inevitably orients itself with respect to previous performances in the same sphere, both those by the same author and those by other authors” (Voloshinov 1986: 95). It means that a dialogic approach should take into account, in the present context, film adaptations of several Tennessee Williams dramas; the more directors involved, the better. This way, the study or analysis of adaptation opens up a vast field of investigation with implications hitherto left unexplored.

This unexplored potential is already evident in the original Bakhtinian concept. “Dialogism refers to the relation between the text and its others not only in the relatively crude and obvious forms of argument [...] but also in much more diffuse and subtle forms that have to do with [...] what is left unsaid or is to be inferred,” as Robert Stam argues (Stam 1989: 14). This is a definition that is missing from the most often quoted uses of “intertextuality,” as defined by Julia Kristeva or Gerard Genette. In this respect, while the intertext or dialogue displays a web of references that texts ostensibly share, it also operates as a hiding mechanism at the very same time. It is the latter aspect, the hiding mechanism of the dialogue, that is of interest in the case of the discussion of the medial break, as it is the

intrusion of an intermedial space into the text, which is veiled over in order to secure the smooth operation of dramatic or filmic representation.

In the case of Tennessee Williams, even the issue of the original or the source text as the basis for adaptation is rather complicated. Consider the birth of *The Glass Menagerie* or *Baby Doll* to mention but two obvious texts. *The Glass Menagerie* has a long and quite adventurous ontogenesis: short stories like *Portrait of a Girl in Glass* and *The Front Porch Girl*, which was later on turned into a play titled *If You Breathe, it Breaks! or Portrait of a Girl in Glass* obviously served as precursors for the play we know today as *The Glass Menagerie* (Biggsby 1999: 37). Yet, critics often forget about another aspect, notably the fact that around the same time Williams got a contract from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to write the script for a movie that echoed Gene Stratton-Porter's *Freckles* (the novel the protagonist of *Portrait of a Girl in Glass* supposedly read). Finally, Williams revised the script that never made it to the screen, and that is how we get to the play *The Glass Menagerie* – which, by the way, was adapted to film by Irving Rapper. Taking into consideration this complicated intertext, Réka Cristian goes so far as to claim that the literary prototype of the play is not the short story *Portrait of a Girl in Glass*, as the canonized literary history says, but rather, the uncredited novel (Cristian 2001: 59). Agreeing with her, I suggest we go even further, as in this *arabesque*, it certainly does not make much sense to stop in a seemingly unstoppable whirl of textual dialogues, not to talk about the quite explicit generic and medial dialogues entailed.

Just to give you a shorter, yet hopefully illuminating example, consider the story of *Baby Doll*, which was started as an original script for a movie, and turned out to be a drama, which was then adapted to film. And why stop here? Once Kazan's adaptation was ready, has it not entered into dialogue with further *Baby Doll* adaptations, or with other Kazan films? It is precisely this aspect of the intertext or dialogue that remains unexplored in adaptation theory and criticism: the investigation of the potentially silenced side of the intertextual web that seems to connect only the obvious textual references of a source text and an adaptation.

What interests me, however, is not the background of literary history or the circumstances in which a text gets composed. The dramatic works of Tennessee Williams have always had an affinity to the cinema. So much so, that in *The Glass Menagerie* he introduces a new device with innumerable possibilities: "This device was the use of a screen on which were projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles. [...] These images and legends, projected from behind, were cast on a section of wall between the front room and the dining-room areas, which should be indistinguishable from the rest when not in use" (Williams 1962: 229-230).

In other words, *the setting*, more than just alluding to, *evokes the cinema*, as if cinematic representation, or at least part of the cinematic apparatus (in the form of a proto-cinematic one) had been installed at the very centre of Williams's dramatic world. It is there to accentuate certain scenes and situations, then fades into the complex of props: it insists even when it is rendered invisible. While it certainly enriches and, indeed, multiplies the channels of theatrical semiosis, it also means the foregrounding of the medial break between drama and film. The cinema becomes – on several levels, due to Tom Wingfield, the protagonist's routine-like escape to the dream-world offered by the silver screen – the Real kernel, disclosing a gap at the centre of the world of the drama. While the screen is put there as a display to present additional imagery, its uncanny insistence may also reveal its function to hide. Used effectively, this Williamsesque screen veils over its essentially heterogenic nature, and thus sutures the intermedial space opening up with the medial break.

But let me also refer to examples where the film version is more apt to open the dialogue through foregrounding the medial break. At the cathartic peak of *Suddenly Last Summer*, the young Catherine (the Liz Taylor character) recounts her journey with her cousin,

Sebastian, to Cabeza de Lobo, where eventually Sebastian died an unspeakably traumatic death. Catherine tells the story of how she was used as a bait to lure young and hungry boys to amuse the quite obviously homosexual cousin, and in turn, how these hungry street boys chased poor Sebastian uphill. While talking about her role as a sexual bait, which she took over from Sebastian's mother, who had escorted him for over a decade on such journeys, Mankiewicz, the director of the film, left a jump cut in the part of the frame where the spectator can see Catherine's face. The cut is so explicit that it immediately makes us aware of its presence, it simply cannot be left unnoticed. Yet, the film gives no clue whatsoever as to the potential origin or significance of this curious "mistake."

The cut gains significance in reading it as a reference to the very same moment in the text of the drama. The dramatic monologue at this point features a curious sentence with a crucial word in capital letters: "Don't you understand? I was PROCURING for him!" And she goes on as follows: "[Mrs. Venable] used to do it, *too*. [...] *Not consciously!* She didn't *know* that she was procuring for him in the smart, the fashionable places they used to go before last summer. [...] I knew what I was doing" (Williams 1968: 152). It seems that this quote is to fill in the gap opened up by the foregrounding of the cut in the film. The cut may be thought of as an *anamorphic moment*, where nothing appears, yet this nothing urges the spectator to question his or her omniscient position hitherto entertained as the belief at the root of cinematic identification processes. In other words, the cut calls the spectator's attention to a look prior to his or her own: an imaginary look that escapes the spectator's look, which is in Lacanian *parlance* the *gaze*.

The *gaze* brings me to another point in the film that invites a dialogue with the drama. Sebastian's mother, Mrs. Venable, and the young and very-very handsome Dr. Cukrowicz are having a talk about the life and death of Sebastian. While Mrs. Venable is relating Sebastian's traumatic primal scene, right between and a little bit behind the two conversing figures a third party emerges: a strange skeleton with angel-wings, looking straight at the spectator. The act of looking is of course Imaginary here, since the skeleton by definition lacks the organ of the eye, so what catches the spectator's look in the act is *the gaze of that skeleton*. While up to this point the spectator was ensured of its position as the one who sees all, the uncanny skeleton reveals a split in the scopic regime of the film. The result is similar to that of the cut in my previous example: the spectator is thrown off his or her comfortable position, and referred to the dramatic text.

However, curiously, the skeleton is missing from the drama of the same title. In this respect, the appearance of the skeleton is a visual excess to the *mise-en-scène* of the film, a presence that is heterogeneous to the environment it appears in, and thus points beyond the diegesis. In that case, the skeleton – being a kind of foreign body both to the film and the drama – is the leftover of the transgressive act of adaptation *as* the intrusion of an intermedial space in the form of the medial break. It becomes present (while it remains invisible for the intradiegetic characters) only to veil over or suture the gap of the medial break, which in turn can be utilized in establishing an intermedial dialogue between the film and the drama.

Something uncannily similar happens in the case of the adaptation of *The Night of the Iguana*. The lizard in the title of the drama (which is also based on a short story) does not even appear. When the two attendants at the hotel operated by Maxine Faulk catch the iguana, they tie it under the verandah, which is – according to the stage instructions – off-stage. What is more, neither the actual chase, nor the result of the chase is "visible" in the drama. What Williams allows us to picture is the following quite strange phenomenon: "there is a windy sound in the rain forest and a flicker of gold light like a silent scattering of gold coins on the verandah" (Williams 1976: 271). It is completely dark in the rain forest, and when the strange gold light flickers out of this darkness, even the wind is muted. When the shouting of the

attendants and Maxine can be heard again, the iguana is already tied up behind a cactus, so nobody can see it.

Not so in the film version: right from the beginning there is a kind of over-presence or over-abundance of iguanas. When the bus tour led by Shannon (the Richard Burton character), stops at a river bank, the men along the bank lift up tons of iguanas to contemplate for the ladies in the bus. Later on, the above described scene is rendered in a way that we can see both the iguana and the chasing as well, and still later on we can also see the tied up iguana – which is nonetheless figured as a frightful creature surveying the scene from under the verandah. The spectator is reminded of its presence, yet it is off-screen most of the time. However, the entire *mise-en-scène* becomes uncanny as the iguana acquires a position very similar to the Lacanian *gaze*, the point in the picture that does not fit, that sticks out of it, similarly to the curious form of the skull in Hans Holbein's famous painting, *The Ambassadors* (Lacan 1998: 88).

The presence of the strange lizard is thus reinforced visually, while the drama hides it. Indeed, the sudden flicker of light and the muted scene, and its adaptation as a chase-scene is the point where the medial break can be best seen. The uncanny light and the silence incorporate the void that is first inscribed in the very title of the drama (thus the more descriptive title of the drama should be *The Lack of the Iguana*), and this void is practically filled in by the film. The over-presence of the iguana in the film version thus recalls its complete and uncanny absence in the drama. The iguana in the film is then the *objet petit a* of the dramatic text: it literally fills in the lack that constitutes the dramatic text. The iguana in the film is therefore not a simple transmission of the iguana of the drama, since the latter is simply *not there*. It is the visual excess of the transgressive act of adaptation: that is why it can have the uncanny atmosphere (being present via its absence) about it.

This is how I mean to deconstruct the hierarchy of literary and filmic texts in terms of adaptation: the sign of the medial break or the potential of the act of adaptation resides not necessarily in the film. The dramatic text is also capable of containing it, which is to say that in such cases it is not the film but the drama that gives the premise and promise for the dialogic analysis. One is tempted to read these instances – playing on the tropes of absence and emphatic presence – as points of the medial break where the discourses of drama and film not only coincide but also turn over into one another, like the two sides of the Moebius strip.

My concern in the present paper has been to offer an alternative way of analyzing literary works and their film adaptations in a way that does not rely on the questionable theoretical tenets of the present-day dominant fidelity criticism. Instead of listing differences and similarities between texts and accounting for them by comparing and contrasting samples in an ideologically and hierarchically biased way, I focused on examples that are uncanny or curious in both texts. This formed the basis of an intermedial dialogue which concerned the silenced or unsaid aspects of a potential intertext. My intention was far from providing a rigorous and ready-made tool-kit or theoretical framework for the study of film adaptations of literary works. On the contrary, I insist on the significance of specific examples that the texts under analysis harbor, and which may open up a dialogic field through revealing a break in their mechanisms of representation. This break provides a prism through which investigation may shed light on hidden details of each text. By analyzing the rhetoric of hiding and concealing in both texts simultaneously, the study of adaptation becomes a dialogic study that goes beyond both texts, thus revealing their mechanisms of representation actively informing one another via an intermedial space that insists in uncanny forms in the analyzed texts, annihilating both the temporal and ideological hierarchies of the comparative-contrasting methodology of the traditional discourse on adaptation.

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