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Modern narratives and film adaptation as translation

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ABSTRACT. This paper analyses the translation of the modern narratives *Mrs. Dalloway* (1976), by Virginia Woolf; *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1994) and *The Dead* (1993), by James Joyce, into the films *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997) by Marleen Gorris, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1977) by Joseph Strick, and *The Dead* (1987) by John Huston. Based on the principles of the polysystem theory (EVEN-ZOHAR, 1990) and on the idea of film adaptation as translation (CATTRYSSSE, 1992), contextual aspects of the process of creation and reception of these adaptations will be discussed, as well as their role in the representation of the writers' literary universe to spectators.

Keywords: cinema, literary system, novel, short story.

Narrativas modernas e a adaptação fílmica como tradução

RESUMO. Este artigo analisa a tradução das narrativas modernas *Mrs. Dalloway* (1976), de Virginia Woolf; *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1994) e *The Dead* (1993), de James Joyce, com relação aos filmes *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997), de Marleen Gorris, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1977) by Joseph Strick, e *The dead* (1987), de John Huston. Com base em princípios da teoria dos polissistemas (EVEN-ZOHAR, 1990) e na ideia de adaptação fílmica como tradução (CATTRYSSSE, 1992), aspectos contextuais do processo de criação e de recepção dessas adaptações serão discutidos, bem como seu papel na representação do universo literário dos autores para o espectador.

Palavras-chave: cinema, conto, romance, sistema literário.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the process of translation of representative modern narratives into films and discusses ways of reading these literary texts in the new media, and possible implications to their reception. Two novels and a short story and their film adaptations are presented, namely, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1976), by Virginia Woolf, and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1994), by James Joyce, will be compared to the films *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997) by Marleen Gorris and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1977) by Joseph Strick. The short story *The Dead* (1993), by James Joyce, and the corresponding film, *The Dead* (1987), by John Huston, is also investigated. We start from the fact that aspects such as the linear format of narratives, the updated quality and the particular aesthetics of creation are regular goals of strategy presented in these translations to create images of the literary universe of the writers to contemporary viewers. As theoretical background, we take into account ideas of film adaptations as translations, by Cattrysse (1992), and some principles of Descriptive Studies of Translation, by Toury (1995).

The cinematographic translation

Research on the process of translation of literary texts into the cinema has become an important object of study since it attempts to analyze different forms of achievement of this very contemporary phenomenon within a context in which readers are immersed in a variety of audiovisual texts, such as cartoons, films, soap operas, TV series and others on an equally varied number of subjects. Such audiovisual products also allow readers to have access to representative texts of the canonical literary tradition.

One of the important facts to foster this activity, in Lefevere's conception (1992), is the varied forms of rewriting which present, criticize, adapt and resignify texts, or rather, activities that contribute to the dynamics of the development of literary systems. Further, translations, as a kind of rewriting of source texts, also affect the interaction between literary systems not only for projecting images of a writer or a literary work in different systems, but also for introducing new elements into a poetics, delineating elements of changes. In the rewriting of a text in a new system of language as the cinema, for example,

new mechanisms of representation may be perceived, since the procedures must take into account poetic and discursive aspects of the new medium.

Discussing the process of adaptation as translation, Cattrysse (1992, p. 17) notes that it is a mistake to consider translation as something more related to faithfulness to the source text than any other kind of adaptation. From the author's point of view, adaptation as translation also follows criteria of approximation and distance from a source text and thus it cannot be separated from those employed in translation practice. The central idea of Cattrysse's discussion is that linguistic or literary translation and film adaptation are distinguished under the perspective of the process of production, because the filmic process of creation occurs in social contexts different from those of reception process since the social context of reception of a literary text is different from that of a cinematographic one.

Even-Zohar (1990, p. 12) discusses the polysystem theory as the aggregate of literary and non-literary forms that exist in any given culture. The author regards the literary system as a set of semiotic phenomena which are dynamic mechanisms and, as a system, is not only synchronic or diachronic, but heterogeneous. Thus, the term polysystem emphasizes the idea of multiplicity in heterogeneous relations within a certain cultural system. By considering this cultural heterogeneity, the polysystem theory rejects the idea of value judgments and elitist selections. Consequently, it is not concerned with canonized works only as the criterion for the selection of an object of study, although it acknowledges the existence of cultural hierarchies.

According to Cattrysse's (1992, p. 54) point of view, the principles of the mentioned theory are very productive for the study of film adaptation, because

[...] translation studies and film adaptation studies are both concerned with the transformation of source text into target texts under some conditions of 'invariance', or equivalence (emphasis in original).

Toury's (1995) perspective of translation also shares this view. By focusing on reception, he tries to systematize a method of analysis that consolidates the interaction of the translated text with the target system. He developed the idea of social norms that are responsible for the translators' aesthetic assumptions in the target culture. Concerning literary texts, the social norms may be related to some elements of the poetics of the source text, such as style, language, themes, genres, for instance, that translators must observe, as

well as literary conventions of the target system which affect their decisions.

The process of translation on the screen also follows this principle, since film adaptations are inserted in specific poetics, in a different context of production and, as a consequence, they present particular processes of creation, and sometimes are subjected to some constraints of the market industry in which, in many cases, the main objectives are to provide spectators with entertainment and/or to present cultural products with commercial purposes.

Thus, film adaptation studies should not be focused on the assumption of faithfulness or on the judgment of parameters of high or low quality of the analyzed objects. Instead, they should observe the way these texts are read in the new context of language, in what circumstances they are produced as a result of a process of cultural transfer, and their function in the cinematic context.

Modern narratives in adaptation

Modern narrative is characterized by its experimental nature since it does not necessarily follow a linear order in plot structure, or rather, with a beginning, middle and end. The emphasis of that kind of narrative is not on the story itself but on the possibility of making the readers go deeper into the constant stream in the characters' consciousness which takes them closer to the process of association of impressions, ideas and memory.

Humphrey (1972) defines the narrative in this perspective of writing as the stream-of-consciousness novel, identified immediately by its subject matter. The author emphasizes that this aspect, rather than its techniques, its purposes or its themes, distinguishes it and reinforces that:

[h]ence, the novels that are said to use the stream-of-consciousness *technique* to a considerable degree prove, upon analysis, to be novels which have as their essential subject matter the consciousness of one or more characters; that is, the depicted consciousness serves as a screen on which the material in these novels is presented (HUMPHREY, 1972, p. 2).

The novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1976) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and the short story *The Dead* (1993) were produced under the process of 'innovative style', which contributed to insert Joyce and Woolf in canonical modern literature.

Regarding the process of translation/adaptation of these texts to the cinema, some questions may be asked in order to understand or at least to reflect upon their rewriting into the new context of production and their projection as audiovisual representations of texts of a literary tradition.

Starting from the fact that aspects such as the linear format of narratives, their updated quality, and the particular aesthetics of creation presented by these translations may be seen as regular strategies that represent images of the literary universe of the writers to contemporary viewers, we will analyze some ways these cultural products are constructed on the screen and interpreted in the context of reception.

The linear format of narratives

One of the most common strategies used in the cinematographic texts in question is the creation of a story with linear events. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Marleen Gorris, themes and elements of Woolf's plot are presented in this perspective. It is a drama focusing on situations of a day in the life of the main character, Clarissa (Vanessa Redgrave) while organizing a party. Through the use of the flashback technique, some events of Clarissa's past, when she was a young girl, are shown. Other characters – Peter Walsh (Michael Kitchen) and Septimus Smith (Rupert Graves) – establish this relation between the present and the past. Peter, who loved Clarissa in his youth, but was rejected by her, comes back to England after a long period in India. Similar to Peter, Septimus is tormented by his past, but his problems are of a different kind since they are linked with the effects of World War I, which eventually led him to commit suicide.

The film reinforces aspects of the novel such as Clarissa and Peter's reminiscences and Septimus's mental disturbance in the London of the 1920's. However, it incorporated a new perspective. Whereas in the novel these facts are developed at the level of the characters' reflections, in the film they change to a strong visual appeal and are part of the constitutive elements of the narrative.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1977), by Joseph Strick, just as Joyce's novel did, presents the school years of the main character, Stephen Dedalus, in whom the spectator visualizes information from his childhood until his first years as a young man, his intellectual awakening, and his rebellious attitudes against social and religious conventions in his education. The presence of elements of Joyce's literary universe is clearly highlighted in Strick's project. However, the setting up of the filmic narrative has a different perspective in such a way that it becomes more conventional on screen. The first scene, for example, is very representative of the above since the spectators observe a camera movement which shows the Irish landscape putting emphasis on geographic references and historical facts, such as: "Ireland, 1885 – Ruled by Britain but

moving towards Independence under the leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell, a protestant nationalist supported by the Catholic majority of his country."

Similar to techniques in the short story, in *The Dead* (1984), by John Huston, one finds the description of the main characters' actions and the articulation of those to the context of interaction (the party in the Morkan sisters' house). In the film, however, besides the description of the main characters' actions, one is introduced to these characters through dialogues and the articulation of the context of interaction (the party in the Morkan sisters' house).

Concerning the innovative characteristics of the literary texts studied as modern deeply impacting narratives at the beginning of the last century, we observe a common element in their translations for the screen: a tendency towards the construction of more traditional narratives in the new contexts. This idea is reinforced by some critics. Merten (1998, p. 1), for example, in his text 'Vanessa Redgrave's art gives life to Mrs. Dalloway' says what is found in *Mrs. Dalloway* is a reduced version of the novel, but not the implications of its style. Olsen (2002), talking on *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 'On the page/On the Screen: two ways of reading Joyce', affirms that Strick's narrative is clearly more conventional than those of *Ulysses* (1967) or *Finnegans Wake* (1965). Wawrzyska (1998, p. 72), discussing in 'Apotheosis, Metaphor, and Death: John Huston's *The Dead* Again' the idea that the Gabriel's epiphanic moment at the end of *The Dead* was not very much explored in terms of cinematic possibilities, writes that Huston is an artist that used Joyce as a model, but drew life out of his model and gave it his own. We can see in these interpretations that, although all the critics emphasize the more traditional structure of the films, they also recognize that some important elements of the source texts are highlighted and suggest that the filmic narratives have artistic potentials.

Updated quality

This strategy may be directly associated to the context of production of cinematographic translations. It may be interpreted as a consequence of particular readings of the texts taking aspects of reception into consideration.

Cattrysse (1992, p. 60) discusses the presentation and the functioning of a film adaptation within its filmic context and reinforces the idea that films are not presented to the public by their credits alone. They are also presented by a set of parafilmic activities, such as previews, critical reviews, promotional activities etc., which are important to

the process of reception in the target system. Thus, a description of the context of production of the object of study and its reception should be taken into account, since the functioning of a film adaptation varies in time and space.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, this situation may be observed through the way some themes are developed and some characters constructed. By the use a flash-forward in the very first scene, Septimus, the war neurotic character, is shown in the trenches at the moment of his friend Evans's death. In the novel, discussions on the war are constant, but its development is presented through the characters' insights and reactions. In the film, the visual appeal seems to bring something more attractive or with more impact to spectators at the very beginning of the narrative.

Pruzan (2002, p. 4), in the text 'Adapting *Mrs. Dalloway*', reinforces that to Eileen Atkins, the screenwriter, the main objective of this strategy was to make clear to spectators the connection between the characters since the beginning. Once more the idea of directing the literary universe is transmitted to the audience.

The above aspect may also be observed in the films based on Joyce's texts. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, two relevant procedures reinforce the updated quality of the text: the presence of historical information on screen about Ireland in the very beginning of the cinematographic narrative and the use of language spoken in dialogues or voice-over. The first procedure may be interpreted as an attempt to contextualize the political and social background of the literary work and the second, as an attempt to organize events.

The articulation of time and space in *The Dead* is redefined through the fragmentation of these categories, leading to a more linear characteristic of the narrative. This boils down to the fact that in the film the emphasis is on the development of actions based on the characters' external realities and not exactly on the internal ones, as in Joyce's text. As a result, the narrative seen on screen has a lower rhythm when compared to the short story.

In Corseuil's view (1996, p. 77), one of the problems in Huston's adaptation is related to the director's inconsistent exploration of two major narrative devices: focalization and integration of narrative development throughout the descriptive scenes. In order to justify her position, the author affirms that:

In general, camera-eye tends to be unobtrusive, letting the characters carry on the narrative. The film's lack of a focalizer and its consistent freezing of story-time to enhance the descriptive sequences lead

to the conclusion that Huston's film is less keen on the potentials of its own medium to narrate a story than on its approximation to a poetic piece, in which images stand still, [...] (CORSEUIL, 1996, p. 77).

We agree with Corseuil on the exploration of these narrative devices, even though we interpret it as evidence of the director's narrative project and not really as a problem.

The particular aesthetics of creation

The interference of filmmakers' individual style of creation and the constraints of the context of production are very relevant to understand some procedures and aspects of the process of translation of these film adaptations. The first point to be made in this discussion is the canonical quality of the translated texts and the status they have within the literary system. Keeping that in mind, directors have to deal with the following challenging situation: to provide the readers of the novels and of the short story with 'plausible' images of the literary universe of the texts and, at the same time, to create images for new spectators.

Thus, the process of reception in the cinematographic system is very much affected by this situation: at the same time that there are similarities to the way these modern narratives are constructed on the screen, as we have seen, there are also particularities concerning the directors' aesthetics of creation and consequently the manner they are rewritten by critics.

According to Worsdale (1998, p. 1), in 'A woman for all women', the film *Mrs. Dalloway*, although a very well-worked adaptation, is not completely successful because it is sometimes too dour for its own good. He says that although the main character is highly feminine, Marleen Gorris by her adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel softens the militant feminist attitudes for which her productions *A Question of Silence* (1982), *Broken Mirrors* (1984) and *Antonia's Line* (1996) have been known. In this perspective, we may observe that the film adaptation has a very particular position in the cinematographic system, or rather, it is neither too close to Woolf's book nor to Gorris's filmic production.

In Joseph Strick's *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*, Olsen (2002, p. 104) identifies a difference in style in relation to Strick's earlier Joyce's film *Ulysses*. In his opinion, aspects such as 'free-associative flashbacks and fantasy sequences are missing' in the cinematographic text. But, similar to Canby (1979, p. 2), Olsen also admits that Strick's text presents important elements of Joyce's universe.

John Huston's *The Dead* also emphasizes these elements of the Joycean text. However, Olsen (2002,

p. 104) points out relevant transformations in the translation process of the short story. According to this author, Huston tends to be more interested in interpreting the text on screen. Different from Strick who, even constructing a more conventional novel, attempted to follow the letter and the spirit of Joyce's work, Huston takes liberties in altering the story. Some examples are the addition of the character Mr. Grace and the inclusion of a reference to a passage related to some ideas of 'The Celtic Twilight', an Irish literary movement.

The main objective of this movement was to spread among Irish authors a tradition of writing on Irish themes, of using older Irish literatures and tradition, contemporary Irish speech, folklore and folk-song in their work, and of linking the Irish landscape with its older associations. According to McHugh and Harmon (1982, p. 138), the Celtic twilight element in the movement was really the creation of Yeats, Russel and their imitators. Joyce, in a different perspective, had an international view of literature. He was in many ways hostile to the revival, which he regarded as too concerned with the past and too regional in outlook. *The Dead*, the last short story of *Dubliners* (1993), is very representative of Joyce's position, since he regarded the stories of the book as a chapter on the moral history of Ireland, with Dublin as the centre of its paralysis. McHugh and Harman, in their discussion on the methods in the development of the stories say that:

The method of revelation is, on the whole, ironic. Romantic attitudes are gradually confronted with drab disillusioning facts; sentimental songs or poems are presented in ironic contexts; the sense of entrapment, a form of paralysis, is frequent (McHUGH; HARMON, 1982, p. 197).

As may be inferred from the discussion above, Joyce was more interested in dealing with problems in Ireland than with its traditions. Although Dublin is the setting for the stories, the vision lights up many other Irish cities. In the case of the construction of the literary text on screen, there is evidence of a particular reading of the short story and of the filmmaker's political reaction towards the historical past and social aspects of Ireland. In a completely different perspective from that presented by Joyce in the short story, Huston shows his own position in the cinematographic text.

Conclusion

This brief discussion has shown that the strategies used to translate modern literary texts to the cinema consolidated a tendency towards more conventional narratives on screen, as they did not

focus on the exploration of cinematic possibilities to deal with Woolf's and Joyce's avant-garde narrative projects. They are conceived as artistically constructed narrative projects by the social prestige of the source texts, but they do not emphasize their innovative aspects, thus lacking an impact in the cinematographic system. As a result, we may observe an ambivalent position of these texts in relation to their critical reception, since they are products of interpretations and evidence of cultural and temporal transfer.

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