From literary pieces to movies: different approaches to intersemiotic translation in modern Taiwan culture

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The concept of intersemiotic translation is a rather new one in the field of semiotics and translation studies, as its first definition was that given by Robert Jakobson in 1987: “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems”. The most common form of intersemiotic translation nowadays is undoubtedly the adaptation of literary pieces into movies – an operation seldom seen as a successful one by critics and the authors of the original works as well. A peculiar situation is that of several modern Taiwanese writers who not only are often willing to see their works adapted for the big screen, but sometimes also co-operates with directors as authors of the screenplays.

Arguing about the artistic value of these intersemiotic translations (or “transmutations”) would indeed lead to endless and maybe fruitless discussions: nevertheless, a distinctive factor can be individuated in the importance reserved to dialogues or, to be more accurate, to the verbal sign system rather than to the non-verbal ones. In other words, some of these movie adaptations are essentially based on verbal narration and interaction, while others assign a greater importance to images and non-verbal sounds (including the soundtrack). An example of these two kinds of filmic transmutation are two movies based on two short xiangtu __ stories of the 60s: Erzi de da wanou _____ (1983), by Hou Xiaoxian __, based on Huang Chunming’s __ short story (1968) and Jiazhuang yi niu che _____ (1984) by Zhang Meijun __, adapted from Wang Zhenhe’s ___ homonymous work (1967). We can observe how in Hou Xiaoxian’s movie the element of speech is reduced to the essential, in most cases preserving the original dialogues; otherwise Zhan Meijun, in collaboration with Wang Zhenhe himself as author of the screenplay, has made dialogues and monologues the chief element of his movie.