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

The concept of intersemiotic translation is a rather new one in the field of semiotics and translation studies, as it was first elaborated by Roman Jakobson in his 1959 essay “Linguistics aspects of translations”. In this work Jakobson calls intersemiotic translation the “interpretations of verbal signs by means of non-verbal signs systems”, a definition that can fit a painting, an opera or a movie adapted from a piece of literature. Movie adaptations are in fact the most used example in all the researches centered on intersemiotic translation, mostly because in movies the transmutation of the verbal sign is trusted to a very broad range of non-verbal codes.

However, the inclusion of movie adaptations among the objects of translation studies related research is made questionable by some practical problems, the most evident being the lack of the exact correspondence between single units in the source system and in the target one. According to Peeter Torop, movies belong to the so-called “iconic languages” that, being continuous i.e. not divisible in discrete signs, are opposed to verbal languages in which it’s very easy to distinguish single signs. In other words, the lack of a well-defined film semiotics system is the main obstacle to the accurate description of the transmutation process from the verbal unit to the filmic one. Another complex issue about filmic works is the coexistence of various communication codes and the fact that none of them can be regarded in absolute terms as a primary one. As a consequence of the eclectic nature of the target code, it would be required then more than a model of such a translation process; in other words, the simultaneous presence of so many different factors makes the building of a standard movie transmutation model an almost impossible task.

After all these statements, the subject of this paper may almost sound as a contradiction in terms; however, the present analysis remains by all means coherent with the above considerations, as it takes the verbal components of the filmic work (monologues,
dialogues and off-screen voice) as the target code of the transmutation / intersemiotic translation process and regards the visual and audio elements as additional ones. In this kind of approach images and sounds are equivalent to the mechanisms known in the traditional translation process as “compensation” (what has to be added) and “interpretation” (what has to be explained). Someone can consider this method as arbitrary and theoretically unjustified; anyway, its own justification lies in the most evident observation that a movie adaptation is, to some extent, a limitation to the audience’s imagination, as it makes concrete for the sight and the hearing what in the reading process is left to the imagination power, which is actually “adding” something. In addition, the original plot is always edited in order to follow a particular narrative path, thus eliminating the countless number of interpretations offered by a single literary piece – an operation that it’s just like the one used in interlinguistic translation, when a translator is forced to limit the semantic field of a sign in order to transmit an adequate message for the targeted audience. In this perspective is then justified the parallelism between movie transmutations and the transformation of adult literature into children literature. Classic books adapted for children are in fact re-written and provided with illustrations, which means that in this passage is added the visual component and writing is re-elaborated i.e. interpreted in order to be intelligible and acceptable for a specific audience.

The discourse on filmic transmutation in the peculiar context of contemporary Taiwanese culture is, for many aspects, particularly challenging for literary research. In fact, after the beginning of the democratization process in the eighties, the new cinematographic trend known as “New Cinema” focused mostly on the life of the low classes in the post-1949 Taiwan; it was natural enough then that the main source of inspiration for the exponents of Taiwan New Cinema was the production of the most popular Nativist writers of the 60s and the 70s.

The connection between literature and movies in this period is therefore, indeed, a particularly deep one and worth a specific analysis. In particular, two points would need an accurate investigation and critical survey: the first is the relationship between the original literary source and its cinematographic transposition in relation to the audience’s reactions, the second is the hierarchy between writer and director and the problem of the movie’s faithfulness to the text. In this paper I will focus on the second problem, as the first one would require a solid sociological background and some data that I lack right now; concerning the second one I will consider mainly, as stated before, the verbal component
of the whole filmic system, regarding the visual and audio ones as additional and only when absolutely required.

The two movies objects of the present analysis have been chosen for several reasons. The first one is their chronological homogeneousness: both movies have been shot in the eighties and both their subjects have been adapted from two short stories belonging to the first phase of the Nativist Literature Movement 鄉土文學運動 (late 60s- early 70s). The setting too is then spatially and temporally homogeneous, in both cases being that of the rural area of central Taiwan in the 1960s. The homogeneousness of all these elements is very important because it allows a more accurate description of the peculiarity of the directors’ approach and of the problem of faithfulness to the text. Using a scientific terminology, we can say that the samples being not contaminated, the error percentage is quite low.

The first of the two movies in chronological order is Erzi de da wanou, released in 1983 and adapted from the 1968 homonymous short story by Huang Chunming 黃春明 (b.1939). This movie, better known in Western countries with its English title The Sandwich Man, is often mentioned in essays and histories of cinema, being the first success of the famous director Hou Xiaoxian 侯孝賢 (b.1947). Erzi de da wanou is actually composed by three different episodes, the other two being Xiao Qi de na ding maozi 小琪的那頂帽子, directed by Zeng Zhuangxiang 曾壯祥 and Pinguo de ziwei 蘋果的滋味, by Wan Ren 萬仁, both of them also adapted from the homonymous stories by Huang Chunming. An analysis of the whole movie would be too complex and will lead us to deal with issues and problems not related to this paper’s purpose; we will therefore focus only on the episode directed by Hou Xiaoxian.

Being just one of the mentioned three episodes, Erzi de da wanou is a rather short movie (about 35 minutes); nevertheless, the director and the author of the screenplay Wu Nianzhen 吳念真(b. 1952, a well-known writer who, since the late 70s has devoted himself to the writing of movie screenplays) have managed to make use of almost all of the situations present in Huang Chunming’s original text, in most cases preserving even the original dialogues. The story is quite simple: Kunshu 坤樹, a young man in desperate need of money, in order to avoid his wife an abortion, has accepted a quite unpleasant job as “sandwich man” for the local movie theatre. In a summer day Kunshu, oppressed by heat and fatigue, recalls all of the past events that led him to his present, humiliating
situation. His only consolation is the love for his small son A-long 阿龍. His life seems to change when his employer, persuaded of the uselessness of the “sandwich man” advertising method, allows him to do his job riding a pedicab. The whole family enjoys a new happiness; anyway, Kunshu’s joy is troubled by a sudden shadow when he discovers that his son, who until then has been used to see him in the “sandwich man” costume, doesn’t recognize him anymore and cries when he tries to cuddle him. The story ends with the pathetic image of Kunshu putting his old make up to be again “his son’s big doll”. 

If we compare the plot of Huang’s short story with Wu Nianzhen’s screenplay, we will discover that the main difference between the two texts lies in the temporal arrangement of the plot. Huang Chunming’s piece is set mostly in the temporal frame of one of Kunshu’s working days, fastening the narrative step only in the final part; the description of past events is trusted to flashbacks evoked in Kunshu’s mind by the sights and casual happenings that he meets during his blind wandering around the city as “sandwich man”. This kind of structure would have been quite tortuous if Wu Nianzhen and Hou Xiaoxian had chosen to do a servile transposition of the original story’s temporal frame; the result would have been even more stodgy if they had introduced a continuous voice-over, thus imitating Huang Chunming’s narrative style in which most of the story is narrated by Kunshu’s stream of consciousness monologues. Wu Nianzhen instead arranged the plot into a more linear structure, stretching an almost Aristotelian unit of time – one day – into two days one. In more than a case Wu Nianzhen in fact explicates into extended sequences situations that in the original novel are suggested only by one or two sentences of Kunshu’s flashbacks. Among these scenes are included, for instance, the distribution of rice at the local Presbyterian church and the quarrel between Kunshu and his wife. This way, a redundancy of flashbacks can be avoided and it’s easier for the spectator to establish the consequentiality between the various events. An example is a single sequence where three different facts are connected: a thirsty Kunshu comes back to the movie theatre and finds no tea in teapot; although his costume is worn out and torn, the theatre’s owner refuses to buy him a new one; Kunshu goes back home and, seeing that his wife A-zhu 阿珠 has not made tea yet, gets angry and yells at her. In Huang Chunming’s story, the three events take place in one of Kunshu’s flashbacks and are counterpointed with his comments and reflections; Hou Xiaoxian and Wu Nianzhen instead let the images and dialogues speak by themselves and allow the spectators to re-build the connection between cause and effects, without the guidance of any off-screen
comment. Another example is one of the initial scenes, when Kunshu, plays with his son and recalls in a flashback the period in which he, being jobless, had tried to persuade A-zhu to have an abortion. In the story the event is recalled in the final part of the novel; the movie’s choice appears anyway to be a more right choice, as the spectator is led to sympathize with Kunshu and is ready to adopt his own point of view, thus confirming the adherence to Huang Chunming’s original text.

On this purpose we can now deal with the problem of the faithfulness to the original text and with the writer/director relationship as well.

If we consider a movie adaptation as a literary translation, we can judge the final product as more or less faithful to the original on the basis of various criteria: one of the most important is indeed the preservation of that component called dominant by Jakobson. Although recently scholars like Umberto Eco have advanced some reserves about the absolute value, in objective terms, of the dominant, it is nevertheless a most helpful concept for the evaluation of any translation product. To some extent, Eco is right in his advice to a potential translator “try to find out what’s the dominant of this text for you and aim your choices and decisions on its basis”, as the countless messages conveyed by a text always exceeds the author’s intentions.

In Erzi de da wanou we can distinguish two main dominants: the first one is what Torop would call the psychological chronotope of the character Kunshu, i.e. how he is perceived by the audience and by himself and the other being Huang Chunming’s literary style. It would be hard to question the first point as actually being one of the dominants, if not the main one, of the text. Huang Chunming’s narrative is conducted, in the 95% of the text, by Kunshu’s viewpoint; in most cases the author even renounces to the third-person narration, trusting the readers to comments and the monologues of his character. In the movie, Hou Xiaoxian respects this dominant, as his camera follows closely Kunshu (actor Chen Bozheng) in his endless walks as “sandwich man” in the small rural town’s streets and surroundings; even the few paragraphs in which Huang Chunming leaves Kunshu’s viewpoint to adopt that of his wife A-zhu are translated in just one shot of no more than few seconds. Wu Nianzhen’s dialogues too contributes to the exact

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1 In his collection of essaysDire quasi la stessa cosa (Saying almost the same thing), Bompiani, Milano, 2003, Eco states that “...The concept of “dominant”, re-examined nowadays, it’s more indefinite than one could expect: sometimes it is a technique (metrical structure and rhyme, for instance), sometimes it's an art that, in a certain historical period, act as model for the others (visual arts in the Renaissance period), sometimes is the main function (aesthetic, emotional or whatever else) of a text...”
2 Eco Dire quasi la stessa cosa.
3 Torop Total'nyj perevod
transposition of Huang Chunming's original character, conveying in first place the lovable sides of his personality and presenting him as a caring father and husband and then showing the shame he feels in doing such a humiliating and frustrating job (significantly enough Hou Xiaoxian has chosen to change Kunshu's original “sandwich man” costume, an European uniform, into a clownish one) and the contempt in which is held by others – on this purpose in the screenplay has been added the scene, absent in the original story, in which a band of street urchins plays a bad trick to Kunshu, stealing his costume and accessories while he is in the toilet.

Concerning the faithfulness to Huang Chunming's literary style, Wu Nianzhen, as author of the screenplay, has done a remarkable job; the movie's dialogues can be divided into three distinct groups:

1) Dialogues taken from the original fiction work and left unchanged in the screenplay (such as the dialogue between Kunshu and A-zhu, when she first calls him “A-long’s big doll”, and the one between Kunshu and the clerk at the registry office).

2) Dialogues taken from the original work, extended and enriched in the screenplay (the dialogues between Kunshu and his uncle and the quarrel between husband and wife).

3) Dialogues absent in the original work, created by the screenplay's author (these are actually only two: the one between Kunshu and A-zhu about contraceptives and the one between Kunshu’s uncle and an innkeeper’s owner - the reason of the latter’s addition will be explained later).

Obviously, the adherence to Huang Chunming’s short story has been one of the main goals of both director and author of the screenplay; in this respect Hou Xiaoxian has made a masterly use of the visual and audio components. The dim midday light, the half-naked body of many of the walk-ons and the make-up smeared on Kunshu’s face convey exactly the oppressive hot described in the original text with expressions such as “the sun was like a blazing fireball” and “his throat almost burst with thirst”. On the other hand the sounds too help to concretise many of the messages of the story that it would have been hard to transmit by words, such as the dullness of Kunshu’s job, which is wonderfully translated into the monotonous, rhythmic sound of the tambourine he uses to attract the attention of the passers-bys. An important role is also played by the spoken word compared to the written one: as the language used in the movie is Taiwanese Minnan and not Mandarin, the audience has an easier task in picking out the topographical
The chronotope of the movie, i.e. its particular geographical setting. Wu Nianzhen, as author of the screenplay, has also confirmed his faithfulness to Huang Chunming’s literary world by indirect quotes of other works, as in the dialogue in which Kunshu reproaches A-zhu after discovering she has been made use of contraceptive, a situation which reminds us of the central theme of the short story *Xian* “Ringworms”.

The last point to be analysed is the director’s attitude to the film material and his position towards the original work, which is what Torop calls the director’s “actual chronotope”. Being one of the most important figures of Taiwanese New Cinema, Hou’s choice to make a movie from this story is of course not casual. In many of the New Cinema’s movies there is a strict dualism between tradition and modernity, the autochthonous and the foreign; in this perspective Hou represent the contrast between the “sandwich man” advertising method, which is “foreign” and therefore “bad” and the traditional one represented by the pedicab. It is justified then also the change in the representation of Kunshu’s uncle: in the novel he is a selfish, petty character unwilling to financially help his nephew. In the movie he becomes instead a humble man, who can hardly support his own family and who is ashamed by the clownish disguise put up by Kunshu to make a living. In the final part of the movie Hou Xiaxian and Wu Nianzhen add a dialogue, absent in Huang’s story, in which the uncle proudly points to the innkeeper Kunshu riding the pedicab and says that he too has done similar jobs in his youth. To Hou the traditional familiar unit has apparently an importance even greater than in Huang Chunming: this is perhaps the reason that led the director to eliminate the scene in which Kunshu, passing by a house of pleasure, is sexually tempted by one of the prostitutes.

In conclusion, we can see that *Erzi de da wanou* is a successful example of transmutation: being a macrostilistic filmic translation, it keeps the original’s work thematic and stylistic dominant, at the same time expressing the originality and the value of the author’s own artistic world.

The second of the two movies is *Jiazhuan yi niu che* 嫁妝一牛車, directed by Zhang Meijun 張美君 and released in 1984, just a year after *Erzi de da wanou*. The source of the subject is Wang Zhenhe 王禎和 (1940-1990)’s celebrated short story (1967); Wang Zhenhe himself has adapted the screenplay.

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6 At first I had some doubts on this, because on the VCD cover it was reported the name of Huang Chunming as author of the screenplay. However, after some research, it can be affirmed beyond any doubt that Wang Zhenhe was actually
*Jiazhuang yi niu che* is a medium-length movie (98 minutes), which follows closely the arrangement of the original work’s plot. The story, in short, is this: Wanfa 萬發, a poor farmer, is forced to make a living by driving a third party’s oxcart, because his deafness doesn’t allow him to do any other job. Things are made worse by his wife A-hao 阿好’s uncontrollable passion for gambling, which has forced them to sell all of their children, except for Lao Wu 老五 (or A-gou 阿狗, as he is called in the movie). The monotony of the family’s life is broken by the arrival of Jian 簡, a clothes peddler from Lugang 鹿港, who settles into the hut near to Wanfa’s. The Lugang peddler seems to stir A-hao’s interest and after a while they start a relationship under the very eyes of Wanfa, who, being deaf, is of course the last to realize the actual situation. When Jian leaves to attend his business in Taibei, the relative prosperity enjoyed by Wanfa’s family after his arrival (Jian had employed Lao Wu as his assistant) comes to an end, also because Wanfa loses his job as oxcart-driver. When Jian returns and finds that his hut has been rented to another, he moves in with Wanfa and A-hao. This grotesque situation provokes the laughter and gossips of the whole village; Wanfa tries to act as if nothing has been happening, until when, in an outburst of rage, he drives Jian out of the house. Life resumes its usual course; Wanfa gets another job as oxcart-driver but one day he loses control of the cart and accidentally kills a child. Having been sentenced to jail, Wanfa is unable to support his family anymore: his worries about A-hao and Lao Wu are unjustified as Jian has come back and provides for the whole family. What’s more, after Wanfa’s release, he buys him an oxcart, the very thing Wanfa has been dreaming of for all his life. Wanfa then cannot but accept this paradoxical situation: he has actually given his wife in marriage to another, accepting the oxcart as dowry price.

The plot is obviously far more complex than that of *Erzi de da wanou*; it would seem then a more suitable subject for a movie, considering also the Wang Zhenhe’s lifetime interest in cinema. In the screenplay actually there aren’t substantial changes in the plot’s structure: the only variation is the passage from the ring structure of the original story (the action begins and ends in a local inn where Wanfa, brooding on his present situation, recalls in a flashback all the past events that led him to his despicable condition) to a

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7 Wang Zhenhe has adapted many of his works into movie screenplays: besides *Jiazhuang yi niu che* we can mention other film adaptations, such as *Meiren tu 美人圖* and *Meigui, meigui wo ai ni 玫瑰玫瑰我愛你*. One of his original screenplays, *Rensheng gewang 人生歌王* has instead later re-written as a novel.
linear one. This change is justified as a full ring structure is seldom used in cinematographic works, because its use could cause a drop of the audience's interest and expectations. In *Jiazhuang yi niu che* there's also the significant absence of flashback: the whole movie is chronologically framed in the contemporary events and all the references to the past are trusted to the dialogues and to the comments of Wanfa and A-hao's fellow villagers. This last point is important because the author transfers most of the story's third-person comments just in these lines. In this respect, a good expedient is that of setting some of the villagers' jests into the form of popular ballades sung by local storytellers, as the one which comments the whole story “*Just think about it, A-hao has married her guest, the dowry being an oxcart; the cuckold drinks his beer in peace. It's said that a sweets-box is enough for a virgin, but for a two-times married bride they need an oxcart!*” In this way it's avoided the use of a continuous voice-over; what's more, these short sketches are sung in Taiwanese Minnan, thus adding a strong regional flavour to the movie and translating into sounds the “nativist” writing style of Wang Zhenhe. Speaking of the use of Minnan, one of the weakest points of the movie is, among other things, the odd choice of performing the dialect using a “mandarinezed” Minnan, i.e. pronouncing typical Taiwanese expressions according to the characters’ Mandarin pronunciation, or, *vice versa*, use the Minnan pronunciation for standard Mandarin sentences. In this way the dialogues sound obviously unnatural and artificial to the Chinese audience's ear and the ambition of both writer and director of creating a realistic movie turns so into a complete failure. A very regrettable thing, if we think how the visual component instead conveys very properly the world of Wang Zhenhe's original work.

Concerning the use of dialogues, *Jiazhuang yi niu che* differs from *Erzi de da wanou*, as there are very few dialogues in Wang Zhenhe's short story. The original narration is in fact carried own through Wanfa's viewpoint and follows his emotions, his thoughts and even his sensorial perception, as sometimes words and whole sentences are not reported because Wanfa is actually unable to hear them. Of course, it would have been impossible to adopt this view entirely without taking the risk of realize an almost silent movie; on the other hand, developing the dialogues, especially those between A-hao and Jian, has had the side effect to twist the dominant of the original work, as I'm going to explain now.

The thematic dominant of Wang Zhenhe's original work is undoubtedly the character of Wanfa seen as the representation of the individual's impotence to affirm his personality over a ruthless social system. In other words, a faithful movie adaptation should have kept
the psychological chronotope of Wanfa as the core of the whole filmic product. *Jiazhuang yi niu che*’s screenplay instead treats Wanfa’s character as a marginal one, focusing on its functionality in the plot’s economy rather than on the investigation of its psychology or its metaphorical meaning. The original Wanfa, an impressive tragicomic character comparable to some Shakespearian creations, becomes so an ordinary buffoon, a treatment that makes rather out of tune the final quotation from Henry James, also present in the novel: *There are moments in our life when even Schubert has nothing to say...*

Another significant change has been that of the description of A-hao and Jian’s characters and of their relationship as well. In the case of A-hao, the screenplay has modelled her character on the actress chosen for the role, the television star Lu Xiaofen 陸小芬. The actress’ natural beauty and her impressive physique have forced Wang Zhenhe to change even the physical description of A-hao’s character, which in the novel is described in this way: “Old slut A-hao weighs no more than four liang, has a mouth broader than a cesspit and, oh! Her chest is as flat as a washboard; it must hurt to press oneself against it! What has stupid Luganger fallen in love with?” The change in the psychological description is important because, as a consequence, it causes the change in the psychological chronotope as well. From unfaithful old hag, A-hao becomes so the bored, frustrated young wife of an older man, unable to understand her wishes and aspirations, a sort of rural Taiwanese Madame Bovary. Her vicissitudes have a far more happy end respect to those of her French antecedent, since the writer assigns her a more approachable partner.

In the original story, the character of Jian is quite a singularity: being a Luganger, he’s described as mumbling words in an unintelligible way, which makes him dumb such as Wanfa is deaf: in this way Jian is somewhat de-humanized and becomes so a sort of instrument of fate ideated just to provoke Wanfa’s unavoidable failure. In the movie Jian becomes instead a handsome young man who, having lost his parents from early childhood, is irresistibly attracted to the slightly older and motherly A-hao. Their relation is so described in passionate and sentimental terms, a representation that is very far from the farcical tones in which it is presented in Wang Zhenhe’s original story⁸.

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⁸ Wang Zhenhe himself later expressed his dissatisfaction with this representation, stating that he would have preferred a more “primitive” one. On this purpose, see the interview *Wo ai, wo si, wo xie* included in *Dangdai zuojia duihua lu – xin shu yuekan duimian renwu zuanji* 當代作家對話錄, Chuanji wenxue chubanshe 傳記文學出版社, Taipei 1986.
In conclusion, we can say that, unlike that of *Erzi de da wanou*, *Jiazhuang yi niu che* cannot be seen as a successful example of intersemiotic movie translation, despite the fact of the author of the original story being also author of the screenplay. First, it twists the thematic dominant of the original story without replacing it with another as much as valid one, the change being due to merely commercial reasons (the casting of a movie star in a certain role). In second time the metaphysical chronotope of the writer is also twisted, as a bitter reflection on man’s ultimate failure in the affirmation of his individuality becomes a superficial sentimental comedy lacking even in autonomous value, as director Zhang Meijun seems to have a too little personality to give his own mark to a work that has almost nothing to do with its original source.