

From Text to Film: The Resurrection Narrative of John 20

Introduction

In this presentation I want to look at a specific case of what Patrick Cattrysse has called film adaptation as translation. In this instance we will screen an American Bible Society film called *Resurrection* that re-presents the story of the Resurrection according to the Gospel of John, chapter 20.

A creative and scholarly team worked for three years at the crafting of this film.

I'll begin by taking us through some of the steps that the team followed as it moved from Greek-language source text to film language target text. In the handout, you will find documents illustrating each of these steps.

They include

- 1) the drafting of an English translation or word track from the Greek
- 2) the preparation of a treatment or visual track to accompany the word track
- 3) the scripting of a shot list, or scene by scene account of what words and what visuals go with each other
- 4) the preparation of a daily shooting schedule indicating what words and what visuals the director would film each day

For reasons of time we are leaving out the final editing and mixing of the film which leads to the rough and final cuts of the film

I wish to present each of these steps as an instance of translational behavior in which the creative and scholarly team members exchange source signs and systems for

target signs and systems as they moved from Greek text to English translation, to treatment, to shot list, to shooting schedule. By way of footnote, I will just say that we could also explain this translational behavior in terms of norm theory, but in the interest of time will not do so.

I also wish to cast this instance of translation behavior as an instance of semiosis, that is, the transfer of meaning from one set of signs and systems to another set of signs and systems. In this film, this transfer process takes place repeatedly until the creative and scholarly team, along with its sponsoring organization, declare "Enough." This declaration usually coincides with a judgment that we have sufficient signs and systems to form an adequate and acceptable target text.

After we screen the film, I would like to return to those translational steps, and expand the discussion somewhat by offering some reflections and lead questions on the nature of text and translation. I owe these questions and reflections to a wonderful collaborative effort that my fellow panelists and I have engaged in over the past several months. In this effort, I have learned far more than I have given.

Production Documents: Greek Text and English Translation or Word Track

The first handout in your packet is the Greek text of the resurrection story according to the Gospel of John, chapter 20. The second handout represents the English translation or word track drafted by members of our scholarly team.

These two documents represent unambiguously what we traditionally call "translation." The verbal signs of a natural language source text become verbal signs in another natural language target text.

Production Documents: Treatment

The next handout in your packet is a treatment. In film production a treatment represents the visual track that accompanies a word track. A treatment lays out major scenes, characters, and locales. In a treatment, a screen writer, working from a verbal, printed source text, and with the collaboration of scholars and other subject matter experts, draws on the other sign systems that form a text. It is here, for example, that a screen writer turns a text's images, sounds, rhetoric, performance cues, proxemics, kinetics, and other semiotic information into a descriptive and visual representation of the word track.

Production Documents: Shot List

Your packet also contains a shot list, organized by locales. This list represents a refinement of the treatment, breaking it down into shots and scenes. In this shot list there are many individual camera moves. Each one involves several elements of what we know as film language with its grammar and syntax. This language can involve long shots, cut aways, close ups, lighting effects, sound effects, and so on. In each case, film language introduces signs and systems such as lighting effects which belong to the adaptation process. At the end of the shot list you'll find a list of the lighting effects attached to various parts of the film. This list shows how the creative and scholarly team used illumination as a sign system to create messages about the meaning of light and darkness in the resurrection story. We can point to this list of lighting effects as an instance of non-verbal signs undergoing translation from source text to target texts.

Production Documents: Shooting Schedule

The final document, the shooting schedule, provides an inventory of the various signs and systems that go into the construction of a film. The menu at the top of the page lists these signs and systems: time of day, exterior or interior setting, verse of word track, sound or audio track, day or night setting, shot number, scene description, cast, location.

The shooting schedule illustrates what Patrick Cattrysse and others have called the polysystem that make up source and target texts. Here in our shooting schedule, we see a target text's polysystem.

Screening the Film

At this point I would like to screen a few minutes of the the film that resulted from these (and several other steps). As you watch the film, please think of it as a target text that has emerged out of several semiotic exchanges between signs and systems, beginning with the exchange of signs and systems from a Greek to an English text. Furthermore, I would invite you to think of these exchanges as taking place under conditions and constraints that qualify as translation. In particular, watch how the team transferred the meaning of one set of non-verbal signs-- light and darkness--from source to target.

[Screen film]

Points to Ponder: What's a Text?

The first point I would like to raise has to do with our concept of text. We would all agree that the pages with Greek words and their English translation represent texts. We would perhaps begin to differ with one another on the issue of the treatment. Does it represent a text of a visual sort? Our differences would no doubt escalate when we get to the shot list, the shooting schedule, and the film. In what sense, if any, can we call these documents texts?

To frame the issue another way: if our film begins with a text, should it not also end with one, especially if we wish to call the process between the beginning and end points "translation"?

Perhaps our concept of text is too narrow. What if we assumed that verbal, printed texts are only one species of a larger communication event we call "text." Nicola Dusi has taught us to think of text in this expansive way. He points out that, semiotically speaking, a text does five things:

- 1) it offers the possibility for interpretation;
- 2) it offers an autonomy of interpretation, that is, it can generate point of views, for instance the point of view of a text toward an object, or the point of view of an interpreter toward the text.
- 3) it presents boundaries and limit;
- 4) it provides for an intention of signification that is independent of the intention of the text utterer
- 5) it allows for segmentation or levels of signification

This five-fold function of a text leads me to state an hypothesis. The production documents and the resulting film can each claim the status of "text" because each offers

the possibility and autonomy of interpretation, each offers boundaries and limits, and so forth. As Ubaldo Stecconi points out, the semiosis or sign action that brings the Greek source to the film is marked by intermediate texts along the way. He notes that "In some of these, we had to change vehicles. It was like starting a journey on foot, then jumping on a train, then transferring to a ship...."

Following a lead that I owe to Nicola Dusi, Siri Nergaard, and Gregor Goethals, I will state another hypothesis: a film text only differs from a printed text in the kinds of signs that it features. To use their expression, our film represents a "syncretic text," that is, a text that blends a variety of signs, systems, and media.

Points to Ponder: What's Translation?

My second point comes more by way of a series of questions. What do we call the kind of human behavior and cognition that moves signs and systems from one language to another and from one medium to another, while also operating under the constraints and sanctions that we call translational norms?

Typically, we speak of film adaptation of a book, or visual representation of a story, or the musical performance of a text, rather than film translation or visual translation or musical translation..

But if the conditions under which film adaptation occur resemble those under which print translation occurs, might we not also extend the designation "translation" to film adaptation? From a semiotic point of view, the answer is Yes, particularly if the conditions respect the boundaries and limits of a source text.

Take the case of the non-verbal signs in the Greek text and their counterparts in the film such as the Greek text's references to light and dark and the film's translation of that information into images of light and dark. What kind of behavior, what kind of cognition accounts for their transfer? We are dealing clearly with what Ubaldo Stecconi in his paper calls "multimedia translation." The real issues, or so they seem to me, lie in the debate that Stecconi's research will spark over the types of multimedia translation we face.

Points to Ponder: When Does Translation Begin?

I indicated above that the process of building this film--our team semiosis-- took 3 years, from start to finish. But, from a semiotic point of view, these dates represent points on a much longer continuum, stretching back in time and forward in time. This semiotic continuum is a notion that I have with gratitude borrowed from the work of Gregor Goethals. The Greek text for John 20 has its own semiotic history, reaching back into oral tradition. And the film marks the beginning of a whole new history of interpretation, perhaps beginning right here in Manchester, among other places.

So when does the act of translation begin? An answer would seem to depend on what we wish to measure and where on the continuum of semiosis we wish to start. Does translation begin at the point of a production contract or working agreement? Or does it span all or part of the history of semiosis that defines the pathways our text has followed across time, place, language, culture and medium.

Points to Ponder: If we could, should we?

But even if we could call film adaptation a form of translation on polysystem, semiotic, or some other grounds, should we? After all, we are not just talking about a matter of semantics. There are institutions, traditions, status and power structures, as well as professions and careers in the balance. Professional translators suffer enough from marginalization, exploitation, and under-representation. Do we want to increase their professional and personal stress by blurring the long-standing distinctions between translators, adaptors, rewriters, paraphrasers, not to mention script writers, film-makers, composers, and choreographers?

On the other hand would this blurring help the status of translators by forging alliances with other professional groups?

Only time will tell.

Conclusion

Returning, to the beginning of this presentation, I will note that our film stands as a sign of the sea changes that are now sweeping across translation production, training, research, and criticism. Media culture, new forms of visual and digital literacy, expanding notions of text, and post-modern theories of meaning all combine to make a frontal assault on traditional notions of the primacy of print media and culture, the preeminence of literary culture, the authority of text, and the stability of meaning.

As Ron Roschke, one of our consultants puts it, "translators are about to take off on the journey of their careers. So put up your tray tables, buckle your seat belts, and get ready for take off."

Thank you.

