Nicola Dusi*

Intersemiotic translation: Theories, problems, analysis

Abstract: This paper draws on Jakobson's tripartite division of the notion of translation, and Eco's discussion of the terms in his book on translation, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (2003b). It focuses specifically on the issue of intersemiotic translation, questioning and showing what it means to "translate" from one "language" to another, such as from the novel to the medium of film, and to what extent the term translation is used metaphorically or whether it is semantically extended to include a broader notion of translation than that between natural languages.

Keywords: Eco, translation, intersemiotic translation, adaptation, equivalence

1 Translation, interpretation, transmutation

When embarking on a discussion of intersemiotic relations, especially between written and audiovisual texts, an initial objection needs to be borne in mind: although the issue concerned is translatability, the works are nonetheless autonomous and have their own internal coherence and cohesion. Various factors, including their specific "illocutionary force" (see Geninasca 1992), are such that the texts are not interchangeable. What is of interest here, however, is their interdependence, given that the various arts and their muses, as Lotman (1998) has taught us, go hand in hand, and are bound up, for example, with the possibility of getting different languages to interact in enunciative operations that are of the same nature or perform the same functions (Bettetini 1984; Metz 1991).

When dealing, for instance, with translation between literary texts and visual and audiovisual texts, the semiotic systems are almost totally separate on the expressive plane. On the content plane, the gambit of translatability remains open, if it is accepted that the latter is one of the fundamental properties of all semiotic systems (Greimas and Courtés 1979). In his proposed three-part division of forms of translation, Roman Jakobson (1959: 261) defined *intersemiotic translation*

*Corresponding author: Nicola Dusi,** Department of Communication and Economics, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, via Allegri 9 Reggio Emilia 42121, Italy, E-mail: nicolamaria.dusi@unimore.it

as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems."
To emphasize the idea of *transformation*, he chose a terminological alternative, the
synonym "transmutation." Jakobson famously suggested dividing the phenomenon
into three categories, that are departure of the present work:

> These three kinds of translation are to be differently labeled: 1) *Intralingual translation* or
> *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same
> language. 2) *Interlingual translation* or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal
> signs by means of some other language. 3) *Intersemiotic translation* or *transmutation* is
> an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (Jakobson
> 1959: 261, my italics)

Translation can thus be investigated within the same semiotic system. Think of
the frequency with which translations are effected between different fields of
social discourse in a given culture, for example between scientific and religious
discourse, or of film remakes, an interesting form of diachronic "translation."
A translation mechanism can actually be discerned at the heart of the inter-
relationship between all semiotic systems and not just the linguistic one, for
example in the *intersemiotic transmutations or translations* between cinema and
theatre (Helbo 1997), painting and cinema (Bonitzer 1985; Aumont 1989; Costa
1991), and literature and cinema. In studies on film semiotics the phenomenon
has been investigated and expressed in various ways, ranging from the so-called
"semiological interferences between the arts" (Metz 1971) to the notion of a full-
blown *transposition*.[1] Louis Hjelmslev (1943) speaks of *transduction* in a transla-
tion between semiotic systems with different matters, substance and forms of
expression, while Greimas (1966: 14) actually adopts the term *transposition* to
indicate intertextual transformations oriented by the natural language towards
other "sensorial orders." According to Genette (1982: 8), on the other hand, what
is involved is a more generic *hypertextuality*, as the transposition relates to a
"second-degree text ... or a text deriving from another, preexisting one."

　　Following Lotman (1981), it can be said that one of the functions of the
aesthetic text is to produce new meanings. While every text creates its own
semiotic space in which hierarchically organized languages interact, it is also a
"generator of sense" that requires a dialogic relationship with other texts in
order to function. In Lotman's terms, even a spectator is a "text." For example,
the relationship between a film and the literary text on which it is based, or the

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1 The issues of the enunciative strategies adopted in a film transposition have been widely
discussed and explored, with Genette (1972) being a frequent point of departure. Significant
contributions include Chatman (1978); Bettetini (1984); Jost (1987); Gaudreault (1988); Vanoye
(1989); Costa (1993); and Lu (1999).

inverse relationship between the written story and the finished film, can be considered precisely by means of the construction of "model" readers or viewers (Eco 1979b), where these are understood to be textual strategies that come into play or stop operating in a reciprocal fashion. Therefore, intersemiotic translation is a complex "form of action," not a simple transcodification but a trans-cultural, dynamic and functional event caught between the requirement to remain faithful to the source and the need to transform it into a text that is understood and accepted in the target culture (Koller 1995; Reiss and Vermeer 1984). This dynamic dimension exists because the different languages are viewed as systems that permit translatability, as partially open systems, given that the boundaries between the systems themselves remain in place and function as filters, maintaining their own differences (see Lotman 1993; Torop 2000).

Eco (2000b)[2] recently reconsidered Jakobson's three-part division, noting that the different kinds of translation are, above all else, *interpretations*, and proposing a new classification.[3] Eco claimed that it is possible to distinguish in a more precise fashion a field of *intrasystemic* interpretation. Actually, he described different possibilities in which "the interpretants belong to the same semiotic system as the interpreted expression," with some variations in the substance of the expression "not very important" (Eco 2001b: 100–101).[4] The field as a whole includes instances of *intralinguistic* interpretation, within the same natural language, such as synonyms, definitions, paraphrases, through to the extreme case of parody, but also internal or *intrasemiotic* interpretations within non-verbal languages, for example in the musical semiotic system when a passage is transcribed in a different key. A link between intrasystemic inter-pretations of this kind and the next field is provided by performance as inter-pretation, for example by staging or reading a text. According to Eco, the field of *intersystemic interpretation* includes, in turn, two large clusters. In the first it is possible to find interpretations in which there are "important variations in the substance of the expression" (Eco 2001b: 106), as in *interlinguistic translation*

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2 Eco (2000b: 78–98); see also Eco (2001b: 99–129, general scheme on p. 100). Reconsidered and amplified in Eco (2003a, 2003b).

3 A new classification of translation that develops out of the one proposed by Jakobson can also be found in Toury (1980). Toury takes account of Lotman and Uspenskij's distinction between natural language, understood as the "primary modelling system," and the culture which, while encompassing it, derives from it as a "secondary modelling system" (see Lotman and Uspenskij 1971).

4 Eco (2001b: 100) commences his classification with *intrasystemic interpretation*, which is an interpretation by automatic substitution, as happens with the Morse alphabet; this "is strictly codified, and may therefore be carried out by a machine." Eco judges this to be of little interest due to the almost total absence of any interpretative decisions.

(or translation proper); in *rewriting*, for example when Eco himself translated Queneau's *Exercices de style* (1947); or in other semiotic systems, as in the case of print reproductions of a painting. In the second cluster, explains Eco, "there is a decided step from purport to the purport of the expression, as happens when a poem is interpreted (by illustrating it) through a charcoal drawing, or when a novel is adapted in comic-strip form" (Eco 2001b: 118). First Eco considers phenomena such as "parasynonymy," citing as an example the verbal expression of the meaning of a prohibitory sign, then looks at interpretation by way of *adaptation* or *transmutation*, when the transposition involves a relationship between semiotic systems with a different purport and substance of expression, as in the example that will be analyzed here. More specifically, Eco (2000b) claims that intersemiotic translation cannot be anything other than *adaptation*, because it transforms, often radically, the previous text, inevitably explicating the unsaid, showing something in image form and therefore establishing a point of view precisely where the novel maintains a greater degree of undecideability.

This issue will be discussed by taking as an example a film which "visually" relates what it has just made known "orally" (*Smoke* by Wayne Wang, US 1995). It will be argued that, besides interpretation, it is also possible to talk of *transposition*, that is of a relationship of translation, and that the problem posed by the different purport and substance of texts and by the discursive implicature can be resolved in an *efficacious translation between forms*. In this proposed scheme, the process of translation may be only *partial*, or may shift to a particular textual level when areas of untranslatability are encountered, that is to say, levels of texts which represent a challenge for the target language and may therefore also be a potential source of renewal.

2 Adaptation, transformation, transduction

Starting with the theory of "layers," which, according to Hjelmslev (1954), contribute to form the expressive and content planes of a language, *intersemiotic translation* can provisionally be said to take place when there is a *re-presentation, in one or more semiotic systems with a different purport and substances of expression, of a form of the content intersubjectively recognized as being linked, at one or more levels of pertinence, to the form of the content of a source text*.

However, it should be made clear from the outset that intersemiotic translation is not simply a question of transposing or re-presenting in the new text the forms of the content and, where possible, the forms of the expression of the source text. In a dynamic vision of the changes that take place in translation, it

is necessary to think more in terms of reactivating and selecting the *system of relations between the two planes* in the source text and to translate these relations in an appropriate way in the target text (see Torop 1995: 190; Torop 2000). Despite the multiplicity of languages present in a syncretic text like a film, and the change of purport, substance and form of the plane of expression with respect to those of the literary text (see Metz 1971), a film should always be considered an *aesthetic text*, in which both the plane of expression and the plane of content are necessary for the overall construction of meaning.

As has already been said, Eco (2000b) divides up the field of adaptation or "transmutation" by stressing the difference between expressive "purport" prior to that between substances and forms. In the passage from a poem to a painting, or from a novel to a film, notes Eco, there is always and above all a "transmutation of purport," in addition to the underlying problem that "the form of the linguistic expression cannot be mapped one to one onto another continuum." In the passage from verbal language to a visual or, for instance, a musical language, "there is a comparison between two forms of the expression whose 'equivalences' are not therefore determinable" (Eco 2001: 98–99), at least not in the sense of an interlinguistic translation like that of two poems, where it can always be demonstrated that "the Italian *settenario doppio*, a double seven-syllable line, is metrically equivalent to the French Alexandrine" (Eco 2001b: 99). According to Eco, then, translation is "a species of the genus *interpretation*" (Eco 2001b: 68), and so it is not correct to regard interpretation and translation as simple equivalents. Eco argues that Jakobson tried to overcome the dispute about the mentalism or antimentalism of meaning, using Peirce to reaffirm the usefulness of thinking of the notion of meaning "*as if* it were a translation" (Eco 2001b: 71). This enabled Eco to criticize both the theory of Steiner (1975) and the position of those who, like Fabbri (1998a), hold that all signification is first and foremost translation (see also Lotman 1993; Lotman 2001). Eco points out that the limitation of this theory of language as endless translation lies precisely in the diversity in the matter of expression: "having identified this limit, we are forced to say that, *at least in one case*, there are forms of interpretation that are not wholly comparable to translation between natural languages" (Eco 2001b: 73). Eco reiterates that "the universe of interpretations is vaster than that of translation proper (Ibid.)." Even in the case of translations and transmutations where a coherent decision is reached about which main effect or goal of the source text to pursue, for example a poetic effect, thereby becoming excellent interpretations of the intentions of the source text.

Although their final positions differ, Calabrese (2000: 103) also expresses doubts about Jakobson's three-part division, given that, he notes, "not all semiotic systems are equivalent": some processes do of course arise from systems of which they are a consequence, but there are also processes which are simultaneously

systems of themselves, such as paintings, films and music tracks. For this reason Calabrese maintains that translation can only be theorized locally and not globally, because it is always a textual and "individual" phenomenon. Presenting translation as something that is always "imperfect," Calabrese talks of a "gradual" transferral-transformation of content between texts, according to the semantic levels that are chosen and the purpose or the goal of the target text. Translation thus becomes "a transferral of content from a source text to a target text by means of (local) structures of stylistic equivalence" (Calabrese 2000: 113–114). Rather than studying translation as interpretation – which is never actually cast into doubt – Calabrese believes it is more fruitful to concentrate on a number of fundamental issues, such as the *transferral* of meaning and the *transformation* that this entails, thinking of translation as a transformational passage from one text to another, from one "singularity" to another. Such transformation will be produced by an agent-operator for particular purposes according to a contract between the Sender and the Receiver. This exchange of competences will be finally subject to an evaluation, or rather, to a "sanction" (Greimas and Courtés 1979). Calabrese thus offers a "metanarrative" vision of the translation process, which recalls Lotman's hypotheses regarding the processes of encounter, conflict and incorporation of texts in translation.

Brief mention was made earlier of *transduction*, before the discussion turned to the intersemiotic issues of interpretation and transformation. *Transduction* is the point of departure for the ideas of Fabbri (2000a). To contextualize them, it is necessary to refer to recent theories of perception. The term *transduction* is used when a perceptual stimulus is translated into electrical impulses that arrive in the brain in a series of time intervals: "the more intense the stimulus, the denser the temporal series," explains Pierantoni (1996: 8), for instance, who defines "transduction" as an *interpretative strategy* that codifies the mechanical stimulus, *translating* it into a temporalized electrical impulse. This polysensorial mechanism perhaps also explains the formation of synesthesias in the brain (Floch 1995; Cano and Cremonini 1990). Fabbri (2000b) refers to Greimas' studies of syncretic semiotics, and also to the above-mentioned studies, which argue that our experiences are always polysensorial and specifiable only in the brain. Reaffirming the importance of the phenomenological theory of perception (see Merleau-Ponty 1945), Fabbri notes the significance of the fact that has been drawn on by recent cognitive theories of *enactment* or "embodied thought" (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999), and advocates the development of a *trans-semiotics* based on a principle of the *inter-translatability* of languages grasped at their sensory level (see Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Considering the spatial dimension of music, explains Fabbri, one can understand how a "figurative syntax" of sound can fairly readily be represented in literature or painting (see Boulez 1990; Fontanille 1999). After all,

recalls Fabbri, it has already been theorized in structural semiotics that the sign is "a structure of contents that can be made up of different substances of expression, with their own syntax." For this reason, by semioticizing the theory of *enactment* itself, one can propose "a polysensorial idea of translation, which, in our view, is also polyphonic, polysemic and indicates very clearly that a translation is always an inter-sensory translation, an action embodied with all the complex senses" (Fabbri 2000b: 275).

3 Syncretic texts and planes of expression

In some studies of film adaptations, emphasis has been laid on the need to distinguish, at least at a preliminary stage of analysis, between study of the content plane and that of expression, though both must be explored (Vanoye 1989). When choosing a given form of expression for the same form of content in the transposition, the film, painting or strip-cartoon will always have to make *interpretative choices* and deploy precise *textual strategies* (see Eco 1990). In a film, according to Metz (1972: 164), the different substances of the signifier are all languages, which select different forms of the expression, once again in relation to those of the content. Disregarding the criticism that could be levelled against an "old-style structuralist" position, which Metz himself subsequently abandoned, it is relevant to stress that from this perspective a film is a *syncretic text*.

The basic hypothesis that makes it possible to talk of *translatability* between syncretic semiotic systems such as films and linguistic semiotic systems must be sought in a rereading of the question of the purport and substance of expression and content, as Deleuze (1985) does, for example, when he states that language only exists as a reaction to *matter unrelated to language* (or rather *non-linguistic* matter) which it transforms. It is important not to think of semiotics merely in linguistic terms, but to think of it as comprising "pieces of language and of non-language" (Fabbri 1998b: 211). It is precisely Hjelmslev's correlation between the *form* of expression and the *form* of content (Hjelmslev 1954) that permits Deleuze to elude the traditional opposition between "expression" (understood as signifier) and "content" (signified), rearticulating it to avoid any linguistic idealism and finding *lines of consistency*. The work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980) helps to overcome the prejudice underlying the majority of positions regarding the differences between languages, and their presumed untranslatability in the name of a rigorous distinction between signifier and signified as static issues of the "perceptual" and the "conceptual" levels of languages. This, at least, is Fabbri's interpretation: "Every perception can become a concept for a new

perceptible expression, and every conceptual content can become expression for a new content" (Fabbri 1998b: 212–213, my translation).[5]

The problem posed in translation by the differences in the matter and substance of languages could then be resolved in an effective translation between forms, although this should not be considered in a static way but as a moment of equilibrium between the internal and external tensions that contribute to create a text. However, as the objections raised earlier make clear, this is not sufficient when talking about translation, or rather, it forms part of a specific point of view on the issue. Returning to the definition of *intersemiotic translation* given initially on the basis of Hjelmslev's glossematics, it can now be stated more specifically that in both translation and transposition the problem of the transformative passage between *forms* only arises when analyzing texts that have already been produced and enunciated. Considering forms, or rather the *relations between the forms* of the expressive and content planes, can only help to explain the dynamics of translation *a posteriori*, once the processes have been realized, by means of a hypothetical-deductive method of reconstructing the generation of meaning (see Greimas and Courtés 1979). If one looks more broadly at the issue of *translatability* between semiotic systems and the *processes* of interpretation and translation (intersemiotic and intrasemiotic), it is necessary to examine individual texts, viewed in terms of their transformative shifts and not just with pre-established *systems*.[6] It can be affirmed, then, that what permits translation in terms of regularity, constants and invariants between the two texts is the relation between *forms* of content and expression, while the *substance* of expression and of content comes into play to define translation as variation and difference, or rather as a process of transformation.

The study of intersemiotic translations as *sets of processes between textual systems*, just like any analysis focusing on the transformational passage (or otherwise) *between levels*, whether intratextual or intertextual, encourage consideration of the *dynamic nature* of cultures and languages. Many analyses of film adaptations or of other intersemiotic translations effectively investigate, more or less consciously, the formation and the breaking down of a discourse construction. Hence, they prompt reflection on the arbitrariness of form, or

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5 Original text: "Ogni percettivo può diventare concettuale per una nuova espressione percepibile, e ogni contenuto concettuale può diventare espressione per un nuovo contenuto" (Fabbri 1998b: 212–213).

6 For this reason, many of the essays in the issue of *Versus* (85–87) devoted to intersemiotic translation, edited by Dusi and Nergaard (2000), concentrate on issues regarding the selection of the invariants and of the enunciatory specificities of the different kinds of expressive substance and matter.

rather, the *conventional nature* of the relation between form and substance, and of the very distinction between the expressive plane and the content plane in a text and in a given culture.

4 Similarity and translatability

4.1 Faithfulness, equivalence and rules of similarity

Many approaches to translation concur on the need to take account of the cultural and contextual constraints and specificities that underlie the act of translation, defining equivalence in its "broad" sense as something necessarily *relative* in many ways (Bassnett 1980; Newmark 1981; Reiss and Vermeer 1984; Hermans 1985; Lefevere 1992). For example, equivalence is understood as a cultural relation based on a value that is always intersubjectiveably negotiable, an "exchange value" that translation-communication seeks to establish (see Pym 1992). But equivalence may also be a specific decision to endow the target text not only with values comparable to those of the source text, but also and above all with similar "sense effects" (Eco and Nergaard 1997c; Dusi and Nergaard 1998; Dusi 2000). It is perhaps therefore better to talk of *similarity* instead, accepting the idea that equivalence in translation, whatever that is, "is better conceived of as a kind of similarity rather than as a sameness" (Chesterman 1996: 159),[7] and to argue that the equivalence between texts in relation to translation is produced by "rules of similarity" (Eco 1975a, 1997b). This takes place not only with regard to the training of the interpreter to reconstruct the dynamics of intertextual coherence, but also in relation to the procedures for constructing meaning activated by the target text in order to engage "faithfully" with the source. The textual strategy of the "translator" work can thus be investigated with a view to determining its *internal rules of similarity* with the "translated" work. It is the task of comparative semiotic analysis to identify the forms and processes.

This approach makes it possible to look with a different perspective at the question of the "faithfulness" of a translation, an issue that has been widely discussed in theories of film adaptation as well. Faithfulness will therefore

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7 Chesterman starts with a restrictive, almost mathematical definition of 'equivalence', seems as a "reflexive, symmetrical and transitive" relationship. He contrasts it with the concept of "similarity," a relation that, in his view, is *not* necessarily symmetrical, is often *non*-reversible and is *not* necessarily transitive (Chesterman 1996: 161). For more on similarity relations, see Cacciari (1995); cf. also Reiss (1983).

involve a strategy that *envisages effects of equivalence*, albeit conscious of its own semiotic, co-textual and cultural specificities, and of the *purpose* of the translation (see Nord 1997). Eco has repeatedly argued that the sense of a text tackled by the translator is always the result of an "interpretative conjecture": "Translations do not concern a comparison between two languages but the interpretation of two texts in two different languages ... Interpreting means making a bet on the sense of a text, among other things ... translation is always a shift, not between two languages, but between two cultures – or two encyclo-pedias" (Eco 2001b: 14–17). One might tend to adapt the source text to make it acceptable in the semiotic universe of the target reader-spectator, or decide that it is up to the new interpreter to get to know the semiotic universe of the original text by re-presenting, in the transposition, values and sense effects appropriate to it. Rereading the tension between *source-* and *target-oriented* translations in this way makes it possible to adopt Eco's definition of interlinguistic translation for the field of intersemiotic relations as well.

> Therefore translating is not only connected with linguistic competence, but with intertex-tual, psychological, and narrative competence. *Similarity in meaning* can only be estab-lished by interpretation, and translation is a special case of interpretation, in Peirce's sense. To substitute a given expression with a series of interpretants means that the substituting expressions are never equivalent to the one substituted, since they can say more under a certain profile and less under another. 'Under a certain profile' means according to a given context. (Eco 2001b: 16–17, my italics)

We can find a way to solve the problem of "similarity in meaning" also in Eco's proposal (2003b) regarding "faithfulness":

> the concept of faithfulness depends on the belief that translation is a form of interpretation and that (even while considering the cultural habits of their presumed readers) translators must aim at rendering, not necessarily the intention of the author (who may have been dead for millennia), but the *intention of the text* – the intention of the text being the outcome of an interpretative effort on the part of the reader, the critic or the translator. (Eco 2003b: 5)

The criteria of faithfulness are therefore relative and refer to a culturally deter-mined intersubjective contract. And if one goes beyond a restrictive definition (see Halverson 1997), variability concerns the evaluation of equivalence itself. An important point in the current discussion is therefore the need to choose which translation-transposition criteria are to be considered pertinent, not only in the process that is under way but also in the comparative analysis. An intersemiotic translation can be defined as *successful* or *faithful* if it maintains a *relation of coherence* with the enunciative choices of the source text, a relation-ship that operates across various levels of the target text. The emphasis, then, is

on the choices of the translator's text, which converge in an overall strategy arising from an interpretation of the intention of the source text (see Eco 1999b). Such an interpretation, which comparative textual analysis can piece together, becomes one of the "norms" that need to be engaged with in the translation process and complied with in the construction of the target text (see Toury 1995).

4.2 Levels of pertinence and translatability

The translations and interpretations that the new text explicitly enacts or implicitly builds encompass all the levels of the text. So when it comes to analyzing an adaptation, or rather a *transposition*, it is necessary above all to make it quite clear which *level of pertinence* has been chosen (Dusi 2003): whether it has been decided to compare semantic-narrative structures, piecing together at this level the various instances of reduction, amplification, diffusion and condensation of the first text; or, alternatively, the set of enunciatory strategies employed in shaping the discourse (actorial, spatial, temporal), ranging from the most abstract themes and values through to recognizable configurations and figures of the world constructed discursively through specific points of view. In this case, one will look at the different "textual programmes" (Greimas and Courtés 1979) proposed by each film or target text, in choosing, for example, to actualize and emphasize the value of certain thematic isotopies of the source novel, realizing them in figurative isotopies (i.e. iconic ones) and making different choices with regard to the "narcotization" or "magnification" of the semantic properties of the lexemes concerned (Eco 1979b: 24–27).

In discussions of literary translation, Meschonnic (1973, 1999) has pointed out on a number of occasions that translation is never just about translating the enounced, but also concerns the enunciation and its strategies (see Bettetini 2000).[8] In general, it is interesting to stress how the target text is transformed according to the translation strategies and methods adopted, especially in the shift to semiotic systems that differ from that of the source text, and how these may be open to interpretative paths that become full-scale re-semanticizations (Lotman 1993). A notion of *equivalence* between texts in a relationship of translation can be found in the coherent re-presenting of sense effects analogous to those envisaged by the source text. A distinction can be drawn between the

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8 A proposed systematic survey of translation and remake strategies can be found in Dusi (2004), which contains an analysis of the variants employed in Stanley Kubrick's film *Lolita* and Adrian Lyne's version of the same title, both of which are based on the celebrated novel by Vladimir Nabokov. For other case studies of literature and cinema, see Dusi (2003).

semiotic perspective, which investigates the construction of a signification of a text by looking at the relations within its different levels, and a closer look at the reconstruction of the reading paths envisaged and sanctioned by the literary or by the visual and audiovisual text (see Eco 1979a and 1990; Bettetini 1984).

Mention has been made of the notions of translatability, equivalence, the openness and closure of aesthetic texts and of their transpositions. It is worth reiterating that the challenge of a *comparative analysis* sensitive to the features of intersemiotic translation does not just concern the strategies adopted by the target text on the content plane, but also the need to engage with the choices made on the expressive plane. By exploring the *aesthetization* of the expressive plane, the film transposition builds internal systems of resonance and significa- tion which can be regarded as responses to the *poeticity* of the literary text or pictorial text, especially in the semiotic relations lying "beneath the explicit level of the signs" (Greimas 1984), that is, at the *plastic* level and the *figural* level (or *deep figurative level*). These strategies run through the plastic codes of the target text in search of an intersubstantial, *expressive equivalence* with the source text (Calabrese 2000). Studying intersemiotic translation, then, does not mean just investigating the differences between the languages and the strategies between two texts, but also analyzing the similarity between them in semiotic systems with different expressive purport and substance.

5 Degrees of indeterminancy

Reception theory-based narratological studies that have compared literature and cinema, and other media, have for the most part dealt with the problem of the "specificity" of each medium in phenomenological (and referentialist) terms. They tend to suggest that the fundamental difference in semiotic systems lies in the different ways in which they represent the so-called real world, by distinct *degrees and areas of indeterminacy* (Chatman 1978; see also Genette 1982; Gaudreault 1988). This idea can be traced back to the thinking of Husserl, which was devel- oped by Ingarden (1931), who used the term *Unbestimmtheitsstellen*. As Holub explains, unlike real objects, situated in "places where such objects would not be in themselves totally determined – the objects represented in a literary work exhibit 'spots' or 'points' or 'places' of indeterminacy (*Unbestimmtheitsstellen*)" (Holub 1984: 25).

Context and specific reference, notes Holub, can reduce it, "but there is no amount of detail or suggestion that would eliminate all indeterminacy" (1984: 25). It will be the reader's task to intervene to "concretize" the text, to complete and to fill out the indeterminacies.

Expressed in these terms, the problem of the *difference of indeterminacy* between one medium and another recalls Eco's objection (2000b: 91–97; cf. Eco 2001b: 118–130) that it is impossible to define intersemiotic transformation as a real "translation." Eco argues that in order to *transpose* a novel into a film it will inevitably be necessary to spell out many of one's inferences, to illustrate one's own interpretation, starting with the details of the possible world that is enacted. This possible world is rendered tangibly and *shown;* it is represented – in the choice of characters, including, necessarily, their physical appearance and clothing, in the proxemic codes, and in the visual and sound codes. Talking about intersemiotic "translation" is therefore more metaphorical than anything else according to Eco (2003b: 158–172), and it would be more appropriate to talk about *adaptation*, because in evaluating a transposition it is always necessary to make many concessions to transformations resulting from textual choices not envisaged by the source text.

Eco's position is of course hard to dispute, since it makes evident the necessity of an interpretative choice regarding the source text, which arises in cases of transposition. But it is important to remember that in the assessment of a translation, and of a transposition, the degree of faithfulness to the source text depends not only on the purpose of the translation itself, but also on the *level of pertinence* chosen in the comparison and on the isotopy (or range of isotopies) that is *dominant* in the translation process (Jakobson 1971; see Torop 1995). When the expressive substance and material of the source and target texts are different, it is inevitable that textual transformations will occur. But this does not make it impossible to preserve some level of equivalence, to consider the translation in terms of the *forms* of expression and content, to maintain textual coherence in the interpretation of the *intentio operis* of the source text, and to respect its enunciation strategies. Secondly, when referring to filmic elements, it must be remembered that they are not only "staged," starting from a deeper level of signification, but are also "framed" (shooted, or, to put it better, *turned into discourse* from a given enunciatory point of view) and then "sequenced," that is, reworked in the syntagmatics of the editing and in the manipulatory possibilities of post-production. In each of these textual steps, the film can build ambiguity and indeterminacy.

This discussion underpins the whole of the present work, and forms the basis for a distinction between adaptation and *transposition*, where transposition (the latter) is to be understood as the *global strategy* of the target text within which there may be some genuine *areas of translation* proper.

Eco's proposals resemble the doubts expressed by Chatman (1978), who begins by talking about the "transposability of the story" and about why "narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium" (1978: 20). Chatman refers to

Bremond's observations about *récit* (Bremond 1973), which, insofar as it is "structure," can be isolated from the message as a whole and permit the transposition from one to another medium without losing its "essential proprieties." In reiterating the need for a study of the processes of "narrative inference" activated during the enjoyment of a text, Chatman points out that a text, which he defines as a closed and complete whole, is subject to rules of *order* or self-regulation, and rules of *selection*, that is "the capacity of any discourse to choose which events and objects actually to state and which only to imply" (Chatman 1978: 28; cf. Eco 1979a). It should be emphasized that Chatman considers the *coherence* of discourse, amongst other things, to be a restriction on the operations of selection and inference, given that it proposes a stable and lasting identity for characters and settings ("existing" elements that are transformed thanks to "events").

Also in the episodes of a film or a novel, explains Chatman, "there is a virtually infinite continuum of imaginable details ... which will not ordinarily be expressed, but which *could* be" (1978: 30). A very similar notion can be found in the work of Greimas (1983)[9] on the semantic level of a text, in particular his discussion of "figurative isotopies" and the enactment of a world of discourse, which are built on more abstract, thematic and narrative foundations. However, Chatman departs from this theoretical affinity with Greimas when he talks of the plane of manifestation and the realization of discourse: he focuses less on the *similarities* between languages and more on their *differences*, reflecting on the different degrees of *indeterminacy* of each medium, which "may specialize in certain narrative effects and not others":

> Verbal narrative may elect not to present some visual aspect, say, a character's clothes. It remains totally *unbestimmt* about them, or describes them in a general way: "He was dressed in street clothes." The cinema, however, cannot avoid a rather precise representation of visual detail. It cannot "say" simply, "A man came into a room." He must be dressed in a certain way. In other words clothing, *unbestimmt* in verbal narrative, must be *bestimmt* in a film. (Chatman 1978: 30)

In *Mouse or Rat?* Eco discusses how a film necessarily entails, among other things, a "showing" of "things left unsaid" (see also Eco 2000b and Eco 2001b), that is the rendering explicit of something that the literary text may just allude to by way of implication or partial reticence. As an example he cites an episode in Chapter 10 of *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni, in which the

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9 According to Greimas (1983), the path leading to the production of signification can be thought of as the shift from *virtual* modes of existence (a text's world of tensions and values) to *actual* stages of the text, which are still indistinct with regard to the expressive substance (linguistic or otherwise), and then through to the *realization*.

author relates the story of the Nun of Monza. At a certain point Manzoni becomes reticent, and how the nun falls into perdition at the start of her relationship with Egidio is left up to the reader to imagine. The narrative itself remains suspended, resorting as it does to the celebrated formula: "The poor wretch answered" (Eco 2001b: 121). It is the reader's task to cooperate with the text, comments Eco, to make that reticence talk, to formulate conjectures and to draw due (or undue) inferences.

If this is permitted, or rather is strategically constructed by the writing, what happens in a film or television version? According to Eco, "that 'answer' must manifest itself through some actions, whether they are suggested by a gesture, a smile, a gleam in the eye, a tremor – if not more" (Eco 2001b: 122). The director and screenwriter must make choices, decide *what to show and how to show it*, opening up what is implicit in the written text into something materially different. Every manifestation of a film "based on" something else, from the faces of the actors to their clothes, the lighting of the scene to the framing of the shot, will therefore be a matter of gambles and decisions, that is, a set of interpretations at all levels with respect to the meaning of the literary text.

It would be more accurate to describe all this not as a simple "translation," argues Eco, but as an "adaptation," because in the shift from the literary to its representation "the interpretation is mediated by the adapter, and is not left at the mercy of the addressee" (Eco 2001b: 125).While the translator's point of view tends not to show itself in a literary translation (if not in the footnotes), in Eco's view the assumption of a critical point of view becomes preponderant in an adaptation, and distinguishes the *specificities* of an adaptation or transmutation as compared to a translation. In order to discuss the views that have just been presented more closely, an example has been chosen of a story that is presented, in different moments of the same film, in an "oral" and a "visual" form.

5.1 Iconism between the verbal and the visual

Cinema, like literature, can also create variable degrees of *indeterminacy*. Its peculiar status as a "syncretic semiotic system," as discussed above, gives the filmic text plenty of scope for concealing, for suggesting and for working by way of narrative, figurative and discursive implications. The audiovisual image may be deliberately open to interpretations and free to *not*-show and *not*-say: for example, it may employ contrasts in sound, unfocused, point-of-view images, partial shots of actors, with points of view limited to specific details, all of which can create potential elements of indeterminacy that enable

the target text to *translate the ambiguities* and the semantic openendedness of the source text. There are lots of films, or memorable sequences thereof,[10] in which the use of point-of-view shots or long shots makes it possible to avoid revealing the appearance of the main character. Even in the possible world of a film, then, it is always important to play with the inferences given as presuppositions. Indeed, a film constantly employs this mechanism – just think to the importance of the cinematographic convention of off-camera sound and of the diegetic world "out" of the frame.

However, the objection only works if it is accepted that *different levels* of signification are at work in translation, as in transposition. Even the polysemy of a literary poem is always (partially) translatable and transformable, at a different level, into a painting or a photograph, not to mention into texts in which a number of languages operate syncretically, such as a film or dance. The same applies in the shift from writing to cinema, or from oral to audiovisual codes, as happens with the *Christmas Tale* in Wayne Wang's film *Smoke* (US, 1995), which is narrated orally at the end of the film, and immediately afterwards, in the final credits, is rendered in images (without dialogue).

Barthes (1964) claimed that the information contained in written captions set alongside a fashion or advertising image contributes to fixing its meaning. This could be better expressed, according to Eco, by saying that it "makes up for" the "vagueness and polyvocity" of the images (Eco 1999b: 341). In cinema, the use of verbal language such as in diegetic dialogues or monologues, or extradiegetic off-camera commentary, the technique commonly considered to be closest to a 'literary' way of narrating by images, can thus be considered fundamental. It is necessary, however, to be clear about what is involved here.

Claiming that cinema is characterized by less *indeterminacy* than literature, paradoxically means accepting that the image is denser, more packed with explicit information than its written equivalent (a collection of sentences or a more extensive block of text). Simplifying somewhat, it can be said that there are two different views on the issue, in which communication is in any case viewed in a restrictive fashion as a simple shift of information:

> A) A cinematographic image carries more "data" than a literary one, and is ordered, though not in a linear way, based on the *legibility* and *visibility* of more or less recognizable figures of the world (people, objects, landscapes);

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10 Examples include the classic *Lady in the Lake* by Robert Montgomery (US, 1947), shot mainly with a subjective camera, or Beckett's brief but intense *Film* (directed by Alan Schneider, GB, 1965), in which the subjective camera, which is always out of focus, is only revealed in the final recognition.

> B) The literary text conveys more information, more implicit than its cinematographic equivalent which must necessarily "show" something. For this reason the written text can be considered *more ambiguous* than the visual one.

In many discussions about the relationship between cinema and literature that are confined to these arguments, the sound track of the filmic image, which is of course *audio-visual*, is not usually taken into account.[11] Among the many possible functions of music, there is its ability to recount, especially in affective terms, narrative changes taking place in the film. Alternatively, it may render explicit (at least for the spectator) the relationships between characters. Furthermore, Metz (1971: 216–217) points out, the substance of content of cinema is not a specialized language but is infinite as extension, or at least it is undefined, precisely because it incorporates the code of spoken language, which makes it possible, at least theoretically, to express everything. The use of verbal codes in the audiovisual medium therefore has a contradictory relationship with regard to what is presumed to be the greater indeterminacy of literature. It can certainly be argued, as Barthes (1964) does, that they anchor the sense of the image, but in many other cases words open up the image or the scene in which they are uttered to new perspectives, to different meanings and semantic hooks, to new interpretations of events. The use of verbal codes, and in general of sound codes, therefore enables the film to *reopen* the meaning denoted by the images, and give them new indeterminacy.

So *what* images is Chatman talking about exactly? Certainly not about a film understood as a syncretic text. In phenomenological terms it appears somewhat irrelevant to emphasize the degree of *determinacy* (or closure) of a film sequence, to separate the visual from sound, light and colour codes from those of rhythm and tone that always combine to create meaning, and to accept without reservation an ingenuous conception of "iconism" relegated entirely to the "readable" visual track, the realm of representation.[12]

5.2 *The finale of* Smoke

The *Christmas Tale* comes at the end of *Smoke*, and is a story that is told during an intense face-to-face talk between two friends. The word – or rather orality – seems to predominate in a clear diegetic situation. The two characters are in a

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11 It must be said that Eco (2003a) also considers the sound and light of a film when he discusses the transformation of matter in the shift between literary and audiovisual texts. For a typology of sound modes with regard to narrative focalization, see Jost (1987) and Chion (1990).
12 See Eco (1975a, 1997b). For a discussion of iconism, see the essay by Polidoro in this volume.

restaurant, and the story-telling skills of the wise tobacconist-photographer (Harvey Keitel) completely engross his writer friend (William Hurt), who is temporarily short of ideas for his next story. The orality "seems" to predominate, but it is not as simple as that. In the film the verbal account is inserted between an introductory and a concluding dialogue of the two friends, with the inevitable use of proxemic codes. Only towards the end of the oral tale is there a slow narrowing down of the frame – up until then consisting of knee shots – which shifts to a close-up of the face of the narrator (the tobacconist) and closes with the detail of his lips, before cutting to the detail of his listening friend's eyes.

Starting with the choice of frame for the shots, the spectator is involved in the unfolding of an oral tale related by the tobacconist to his friend. The story is framed within an initial discursive situation, and the spectator listens in on the story about where his camera came from. The viewers become, together with the writer, the addressees of words that open up very detailed figurative (iconic) worlds. The tobacconist describes a theft in his shop and how he gave chase to the young thief; the documents and old photographs that the youth lost in the street; how he met the thief's blind grandmother when he went to the address indicated on the lost documents on Christmas Eve; and the evening he spent with the elderly lady, after he ended up pretending (out of politeness) to be the lady's missing grandson. Finally, he describes how he impulsively stole a camera, still in its box and probably stolen goods, that he found in the bathroom of the elderly lady, who is quite unaware of what he has done. Over the sequence of shots and reverse shots of the two friends sitting at the restaurant table, who are so absorbed in the story-telling and the listening that they don't even touch the food on their plates, the spectator listens to the unfolding of a possible world in the past, a narratively coherent world. This is a spatial-temporal elsewhere, in which the narrator sets the actors of his story, gets them to act and brings about cognitive and affective change. In this case, does the ambiguity of the verbal code represent or go beyond the ambiguity of the writing? What's more, writing itself will materially enter the scene later on: after returning home, the writer sits down to *transcribe* the story he has just heard from his friend.

As already stated, the restaurant scene comes at the end of Wang's long film.[13] When the closing credits begin to run, and without any break, the Christmas tale that has just been related orally is *put into images*, accompanied solely by a Tom Waits song. The viewer recognizes the tobacconist narrator, who has now become the protagonist of the sequence: he pursues the thief, picks up the lost wallet, ends up at the youth's house where there is just the blind

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[13] The film is based on a screenplay by Paul Auster (1995), who also represents writing, and its simulacra, in the film itself.

grandmother, he spends Christmas Eve there, etc. The sequence is silent, shot in a pale black and white. What is of interest in this moment is not the *linearity* of the narrative level, but what the image immediately wishes to communicate: the *images have been stolen from memory*, not so much that of the protagonist but more the indirect, wholly inferential memory played out between the act of enunciation and the model spectator (Eco 1979b), linked to the story that has just been told by the diegetic narrator. In the images, in fact, the spectator sees the tobacconist who related the events performing the various acts that have already been described. At the same time a point of view external to the actions is inevitably set up, which are filmed for the most part in an "objective" way (Casetti 1986). Once it has been cut loose from the diegetic dialogue and constructed as an autonomous *figurativization* (see Greimas 1983) of the oral tale, the audiovisual story becomes a *film within a film*, re-presenting the construction *en abyme* of the narrative levels of a first story, on which a second one is grafted. It should be remembered that the positioning of the sequence effectively lies outside the conventional diegetic space-time. It intrudes into the space of the closing credits, that is, the conventional external threshold that marks the closure of the enunciation contract between film and spectator (see Metz 1991).

The staged sequence includes some small additional variants in relation to the oral tale. It transposes the oral story, trying to make it less evident, given that it is a curious form of *déjà-vu* (or rather, of *the already known*). A number of examples may be given of this: the pervasive music of Tom Waits, with the recurrent refrain "You're innocent when you live – you're innocent when you dream," acts as a continual comment on the characters' actions, which are inserted into realistic contexts and recognizable as part of the figurative world that belongs to the diegesis of the film; furthermore, while the protagonist and the grandmother are having dinner, the latter's blindness and her state of poverty are stressed in a kind of gag that the oral tale had precluded to us. Unable to cut the roast because the kitchen knife is blunt, the tobacconist tears it into pieces with his hands and places it on the woman's plate. The staging also provides other information that is *not strictly necessary*, not only regarding the characters' clothing and movements, but also the way the woman's house is furnished: some large portraits, including one on the black brotherhood, can be glimpsed on the walls, and there are various items of antiquated but decent furniture that are never described in the oral tale.[14] In this case the image *adds*

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14 Paul Auster's screenplay does contain a brief description, succinct and rich in implicature, of the house's furnishings: "The camera pans slowly through Granny Ethel's apartment, lingering momentarily on various objects. Among other things, we see portraits of Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, family photographs, balls of yarn, knitting needles" (Auster 1995: 133).

figurative elements that open up new value orientations with respect to the oral narrative.

However, the strategy of figurativization adopts an interesting gambit of elision – the decisive moment of the theft of the camera, underlined in every phase of the oral tale, from the initial promise about his story through to the sudden decision to take the object and his subsequent feelings of guilt is *not* transposed into images. Playing on the expectations created in the spectator by information that has just been conveyed, the film simply presents an objective shot, using the knee-shot technique, of the boxed camera already on the living room table, thereby making it implicit, almost taken for granted, that the narrator-protagonist, struck by sudden "inspiration," has previously removed it from the bathroom cupboard. The narrator is only seen placing the thief's wallet on the table of the old lady (by now asleep on the sofa) and leaving the house with the camera.

Additions and subtractions are *not*, therefore, *inevitable*. On the contrary, they are part of a precise narrative and enunciatory strategy. In the *oral* tale, the protagonist's identification, never declared, with the young thief is conveyed through his willingness to play the part of the absent grandson, perhaps with the complicity of the blind old lady, and culminates with the theft of the object. The *visual* transposition initially seems to erase this pointer to the protagonist's fleeting union with the young man's world. At a more profound level, however, the addition of the scene about the rough-and-ready dividing up of the roast coherently re-establishes the theme of the *fleeting intimacy* and the temporary bond between the narrator, the old lady and the absent grandson, figurativizing it through images in the new visual context.

In Greimasian theory (Greimas 1984), the process of *figurativization* is realized in texts according to degrees of *figurative density*, and through orientations associated with points of view. This takes place in a tension between the (surface) discourse level and the (deep) narrative level of languages. When looking more closely at the expressive plane of visual and audiovisual texts, there is the possibility that a target text may resemanticize (see Lotman 2001) the source text, creating not just new interpretations but also making it impossible to return to the first text without taking account of the new reading.

Returning to the issue of indeterminacy and of discourse implicature, it should be recalled that Eco (1997b: 312–313), in a discussion of character traits and possible narrative worlds, identifies not only features presupposed by the texts but also conjectural aspects. One might say that ultimately a cinematographic transposition simply *fixes one of the many possible conjectures*. If a transposition strategy ends up transforming certain properties of the source text, it may *resemanticize* the textual situation, thereby discovering new forms

and levels of equivalence, and also new differences. Considering what happens in *Smoke*, it seems in any case reasonable to view transposition as a process of figurativization that can remain coherent with themes and values of the source text. A transposition may always propose *a new possible world* that maintains *virtually intact* the narrative structures and the core of essential properties of the source text.

Moreover, a great deal of the discussion about faithfulness and the difference between a film and the literary text taken as a source hinges on this 'virtually' (or the *quasi* contained in the Italian title of Eco 2003a). Otherwise it would be impossible to understand why the story of *Romeo and Juliet* works even when the spatio-temporal context in which the events take place is 'modernized', out of aesthetic and cultural necessity, in many recent films; or why Orson Welles' Othello is a perfectly credible figure; or, to take a more recent example, why the lead role in Oliver Parker's *Othello* is not only played by a black man (for the first time on the screen), who is also, quite unproblematically, completely bald, a challenge to Shakespeare scholars.[15]

6 Concluding remarks: on transposition

A filmic text that effects a transposition is just one of the possible discourses (syncretic or otherwise) that may stem from a literary source text, and it activates interpretative procedures of amplification and condensation. In an intersemiotic translation there is always the possibility of transposing a situation fixed at the narrative level in the source text into new discourse configurations enriched with details, or alternatively to expand it into figurative (iconic) paths that are not at odds with the underlying choice. On the other hand, source-text discourse or narrative configurations that are *not* considered pertinent in the interpretative choice that accompanies the transposition can be condensed or simply hinted at, if not completely eliminated. In the process of transformation set in motion by a (literary) text in the (cinematic) transposition, choices regarding *interpretative pertinence* are made continually. They enable, indeed encourage, given the relatively fixed standard length of a film, the *removal* and *condensation* of elements at a narrative level. Often, however, the interpretation leads to the *expansion* of some details to make them isotopically significant in the film as a

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15 Examples include *West Side Story* by Robert Wise (US, 1961), and *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, by Baz Luhrmann (US, 1996); or, respectively *Othello* by Orson Welles (US, 1952) and *Othello* by Oliver Parker (US, 1996).

whole, or to the *addition* and creation of new configurations with actors, situations and narrative paths that serve to anchor the discursive and interpretative coherence of the target text (see Vanoye 1991).

Given these premises, one might conclude that what takes place in a transposition is always and exclusively *adaptation*, as Eco maintains (2000b, 2003b). However, if one considers the *elastic* qualities of languages (evoked by the use of the terms "expansion" and "condensation"), it could be argued that the process of transposition simply emphasizes what *every translation* performs with regard to its source. This is even more the case if translation is considered, in inferential terms, as an interpretative process operating on different textual levels, a process in which, as Peirce teaches, there is a continual growth in meaning with respect to the source text (*CP* 4.132; cf. *CP* 8.332; Eco 1984a: XV).

Of course an *interlinguistic* translation of a novel does not usually transform or tamper with the plot or narrative structures of the source text to any significant degree. But in purely semantic terms, any translation, by choosing to translate according to *equivalences*, inevitably opens up new isotopic paths and contextualizations, and triggers connotative references in the target language, all the meanings and encyclopedic angles of which are hard to control. A (linguistic) translation understood in these terms involves processes that are very similar to those of any transposition, in which choices are made regarding the areas and levels of maximum *expressive equivalence*. In this case, we carry out a close intersemiotic translation within the framework of an explicit interpretative choice.

In terms of the source text and its implicit features, the chief priority of a comparative semiotic analysis should arguably be to pinpoint the strategy of coherence, or at least of *adequacy*, adopted by the target text, and then to try to understand the *purpose* of the translation operation and how it takes account of the target culture.

For this reason, it can be proposed that all cases of "intersemiotic translation," "transmutation" or "adaptation" should be grouped together in the sphere of *transposition*, irrespective of whether they are audiovisual, musical, theatrical, performative, and so on. The dictionary definition of the term "adaptation" correctly refers to the inevitable "conformity to particular needs" (Devoto and Oli 1990), which are functional to the target culture and the specificity of the new text; however, it also contains the idea of a *univocally orientated translation process*. In this sense, the target text appears to be the outcome of a series of constraints, while the source text seems to be reduced simply to a crystallized 'source' rather than a meaning system still capable of being resemanticized by interpretations offered by each new translation. The term "transposition," on the other hand, by virtue of the prefix "trans," involves a going beyond (as in

"transgress") and a transferral (as in "transfuse"), drawing attention to the notion of moving beyond the original text, passing through it, in other words, multiplying its semantic potential. Talking in terms of transposition therefore carries with it the idea of an ordered but flexible structure, which *supports the transformational shift* from one text to another, while at the same time heeding the differences and particular features of each.

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