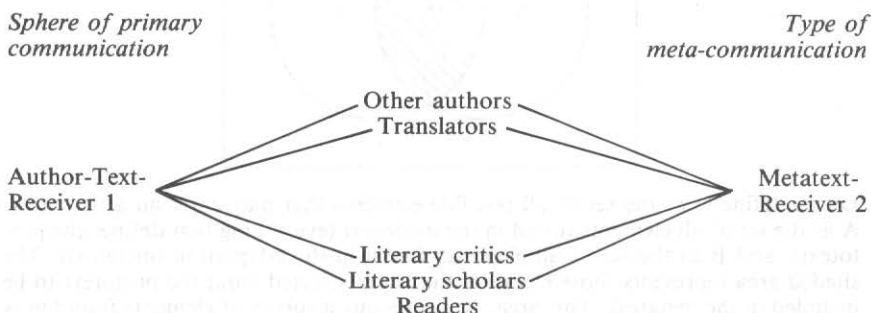


SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF ADAPTATIONS IN THE THEATRE

Perception of the theatrical message relies to a great extent on memorized information. In order for the message to be comprehended, the perceiver must first identify the activity as being theatrical, and not an extension of reality, and then be able to identify the various referents of the theatrical signs.

In most instances theatrical referents exist as an amorphous mass, and are organized into semantic units by the various creators of the theatrical event, and by the spectator in the course of the performance. There is one type of aesthetic creation, however, in which the referents are already organized into aesthetic entities before they even enter the sphere of the aesthetic text. I have in mind here the various instances of adaptation in the arts. Although this activity may be found in all the arts, in this discussion I will present some of the characteristics that apply to adaptations in the theatre. Let us first observe some of the general characteristics of the relationship between a text and its referents in adaptations.

An adaptation of any text is a unique type of work because it is the result of the mediation of another text; its *raison d'être* is metatextual. Anton Popovič, the Slovak literary theoretician proposes the following model for illustrating literary communication in his analysis of the relationship between a metatext and the original text (1976, p. 226):



This diagram represents the communication of a literary text. The primary sphere

of communication occurs between the author of the text and a receiver. The meta-communicative sphere involves the manipulation of the primary text by a receiver, where the latter assumes the role of an author who produces a secondary text that is communicated to another receiver. The meta-communicative process may continue to infinity. The roles of the author and receiver may be switched at any time.

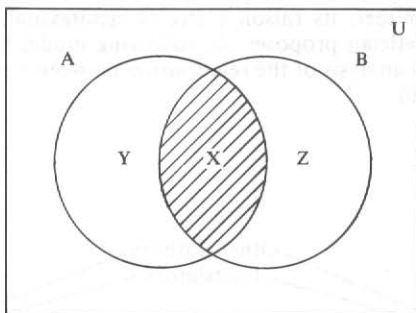
The text of the sphere of primary communication Popović calls the *prototext* and defines it as "a text which serves as an object of inter-textual continuity" (p. 226). The *metatext*, in turn, is the result-object of the mediation of the prototext. Since the metatext itself is not immune to mediation, it may also become the object of mediation and assume the role of a prototext.

In his observations of literary communication Popović is concerned primarily with literary prototexts. We can observe similar meta-communicative processes when we extend this notion to include non-literary prototexts and metatexts.

The unique feature of an adaptation rests in the special relationship between the prototext and the metatext. It is the relationship between these, in fact, that determines the type of resultant entity: imitation, adaptation, translation, parody, plagiarism, etc. All these metatexts belong to a unique and independent system, while concurrently mediating another entity belonging to another system of construction.

The semantic shift is the principle change in the relationship between the prototext and the adaptation. The latter consists of invariant features that it shares with the prototext, and features that originate in the system to which it belongs. The basic relationship between the two systems may be expressed as a point on a scale bound by maximum similarity at one end and minimum similarity at the other end.

On the most basic level the relationship between a prototext and the adaptation, or metatext, is established according to the law of binary opposition, that is presence vs absence of prototextual elements in the adaptation. Any type of adaptational operation begins with selection - a decision concerning the construction of a frame and the specific prototextual elements that may enter the adaptation. On this level, alteration of the prototext is accomplished by selecting for inclusion into the adaptation only a limited set of elements, discarding the remainder as non-essential. Let us illustrate this relationship with the following Venn diagram:



Let us define U as the set of all possible elements that may enter an artistic text; A as the set of all elements found in the prototext (everything that defines the prototext); and B as the set of all elements found in the adaptation (metatext). The shaded area represents those elements that were selected from the prototext to be included in the metatext. This area, X, represents a subset of elements found in A and B. Note that for text B to be an adaptation of A, it must possess at least one element not found in A. Otherwise set B would represent either a *copy*, or an abstraction (digest, summary) of elements from A. Z represents a subset of ele-

ments from text B that are not found in text A. Y represents the discarded, or "taboo" elements. The rules determining what elements will be discarded may originate from the strategy of the individual performing the adaptational operation, or they may be lost because of the variance, or incompatibility of structural laws of the prototext and the adaptation. These elements may belong to a system that resists transformation, or transportation of certain elements from one genre into another. Every text is controlled by specific, sometimes rigid structures, which may not be transportable in the process of adaptation into a text of another structure.

The specificity of the adaptation can be located in the unique relationship between the two subsets, X and Z, in the Venn diagram. Although each subset belongs to an independent system, in the adaptation they are governed by a system of a higher order, one capable of creating a higher order set from two seemingly incongruous subsets.

There are, then, three basic sets of relationships between a prototext and an adaptation: 1) the relationship between each of these entities and the system to which they belong; 2) the relationship between the two entities themselves; and 3) between the respective systems, or underlying codes. These relationships have been previously observed by Gideon Toury in his study of transfer operations and translation (1979, p. 1041).

For a successful manipulation of the codes of the adaptation, then, the perceiver is required to be familiar with the codes of the prototext, and also to a certain degree with the history of the prototext, that is, its various manifestations. The information value of an adaptation increases proportionally with the increase of stored information about the prototext.

Since this paper deals specifically with adaptations in the theatre, let us see how the process manifests itself in this environment, using adaptations of myths and folktales as examples.

The researcher faces an unusual obstacle when studying mythological prototexts, especially those originating in Classical Greece, because their reconstruction is conducted primarily in reference to non-mythological texts. In the Greek examples these include works by Homer, Hesiod, the tragedians, and some others. Since both the myth and the ritual are no longer operative in a modern culture, their origin and characteristics can be studied only through secondary sources. This is made even more difficult by the fact that the transformation of the original myth into a non-mythological (literary) text, and the ritualistic activity into an aesthetic one, made it possible for authors to re-organize the prototext, to a point that at times they appear to be of doubtful mythological origin. Tracing an invariant folktale prototext is also difficult because the verbal narrative of the folktale is only a linguistic notation of a pre-existing reality, and is relatively independent of the verbal narrative and structural variant in which it is verbalized.

Although myths and folktales are usually associated with a specifically non-aesthetic activity, they are extremely adaptable as theatrical texts because of an abundance of shared structural principles with a theatrical performance.

When a cultural prototext, such as myth and folktale, is used as a prototext in a theatrical work, two significant changes take place: 1) the text changes its function, and as a result theatrical laws for production and interpretation come into action; 2) there is a parallel change in the perceiver's attitude toward to text.

One of the more noticeable changes observed in the metatext takes place on the linguistic level of the performance. The specificity of the linguistic sign in the text from which it is adapted is very significant in determining its meaning and function in the new text. The locutionary word of a myth or a folktale adaptation, for example, never enters the performance in a semantically neutral state - it is already provided with lexical coloration by the prototext.

As opposed to prototexts recorded in the written form, myths and folktales function in culture primarily in the oral form. Their written versions exist primarily for the purpose of preservation and transmission. Similarly, all verbal religious texts that are components of a specific ritual are perceived by the ritual participant mainly in the locutionary form. The specific delivery of the word is determined largely by its particular use in the ritual. This implies predetermined voice inflection, rhythmic repetition, delivery in musical form, etc.

Preservation of the above features of the linguistic sign was of primary concern to individuals involved in the dramatization of biblical texts in the early stages of Church drama. The biblical word enters a contemporary performance already colored by standardized enunciation inherited from its natural environment. Any other type of delivery is always contrasted against the original, ritualistic enunciation. The difference between the two becomes pronounced when the word's locutionary quality in the performance is characterized by extreme rigidity, and the secular equivalent aims to destroy that rigidity. Parodies of oral religious texts in the dramatic and the non-dramatic arts are possible because of their prototextual "fossilized" state. The paralinguistic destructive attitude toward a prototext in a theatrical performance is usually accompanied by an identical attitude on the thematic and plot levels.

Secularization of the biblical prototext in the religious play of the Middle Ages was accomplished on the textual level, but in the performance it became complete only when the utterance broke away from the fossilized system of locution that is common in the ritual.

The word in the epic song in many ways is as semantically standardized as that in the religious text. The singer has in his memory a stock of words and phrases of appropriate length and tonal structure, which he can employ for the ornamentation and description of specific characters and plot events. Because of the unique nature of the singer's method of composition, the word is learned and memorized in its locutionary form.

Linguistic modernization of myth and folklore texts in theatrical adaptations involves the inclusion in the metatext stylistic features of language that are recognizably of a much later cultural period than the prototext. Most often an author substitutes phraseology and entire sets of linguistic units with ones that cannot possibly be found in the repertory of the original text, either because such structures were not present in the linguistic repertory of the period, or because the genre of the prototext had limitations and restrictions against such phenomena. Retention of linguistic archaisms in the adapted text may imply greater identification with the prototext, especially when the strategy is the same on the level of plot structure. Substitution with more modern, or anachronistic elements phraseology draws attention to parallel elements of contemporary reality, or to the prototext's timelessness and universality.

The plot of an adaptation is organically related to the plot of the prototext, which provides a set of expectations and determines what constitutes non-prototext material. In this sense, as Lotman has noted, "the artistic information that is generated consists in the mutual projection of the text and expectations (structural inertia)" (1977, p. 234). The plot of the adapted text may identify totally with the model prototext, in which case the dynamics of the plot consists in observing pre-established rules for plot construction. The opposite type is one where the tendency of the plot construction is toward total dissimilarity (parody being the extreme case).

Basically, alteration in plot adaptation occurs as a result of the transcodification of texts from one system into another. The following are some of the main reasons for the variance in plot construction between the prototext and the adaptation: 1) In the process of re-coding there is a change in the structural principles of the sub-

ject in accordance with the codes of the new text; 2) There is change in the foregrounded subject matter to fit the new constructive principles of the new text; 3) The new constructive principles allow for inclusion of new subject matter; 4) The new constructive scheme provides for new development in the action, i.e., it has its own specific dynamism.

Adaptation by elimination alters the prototext by selecting for inclusion into the adapted work only a limited set of plot elements, and by discarding the remainder as non-essential for that particular work.

In selecting a plot frame, the author of an adaptation determines whether to make use of the total global plot of the prototext, or to limit it to some smaller unit. In cases where the global plot of the prototext is immense, the author is limited by the restrictions of the dramatic genre in the "quantity" of plot elements that can be included in the play. The early dramatists of biblical material, for example, limited their plots to events which coincided with the current religious celebration. In later periods this was extended to include preceding and following events. The plot reached such magnitude in the cycle plays, because there was an attempt to include in the performance as many prototext events as possible.

Let us now look at the nature and function of the object in the performance of adaptations. By its very presence on the stage the object becomes a lexeme and participates in the semiosis of the performance. The lexical characteristic of the object in non-adaptations is basically neutral, and the object acquires its semantization in the course of the theatrical performance. In adaptations, especially in the case of culture generated prototexts, the object already carries with it meaning acquired in the extra-textual reality (prototext). It is this quality which differentiates it from the object in non-adaptations, or primary texts. The very presence and implied qualitative characteristic of an object in the performance may originate from the reality of the prototext, from the strategy of the author of the dramatic text, or from any of the possible authors of the performance text.

Objects and their function in the stage performance of an adaptation may be entirely borrowed from the reality of the prototext, that is, the production opts for retention of the prototext's culture on the level of iconic representation, or they may be a mixture of prototextual objects and ones from the spectator's contemporary reality.

The semantic significance of the object (scenic set) in the performance of adaptations at any particular moment is linked to the total structure of the performance. The action may at times require an object of prototextual origin to stand in the foreground, where it will draw attention to itself and its prototextual reality, and at other times the object originating in the metatext may occupy that position. When directors choose in adaptations to represent non-verbal elements of the prototext with objects from contemporary reality (Hamlet, Oedipus, Antigone in contemporary settings), the strategy produces minimal textual association between performance text and prototext. It causes intertextual conflict among verbal, kinesic, visual and other sign systems, and the whole performance may be perceived by an "uneducated" spectator as an amorphous mass.

In adaptations of cultural texts one is specifically concerned with the significance and function of the object in the extra-textual, cultural environment. In parodies of prototexts the object may function to reveal some falsity of the original as perceived by the director. The object in such instances is of a type which stands in opposition to the semantic sphere of the prototextual character or situation.

In the production of primary, non-derived texts, the significance of the kinesic gesture is established when they are projected against the stock of gestures belonging to the spectator's socio-cultural reality.

Strictly speaking, kinesic gestures are not endowed with lexical characteristics outside of some other textual environment. Very few gestures are endowed with

basic semantic features and are capable of participating in semiosis independently. Mimes are composed of such gestures. In various periods the theatrical tradition also had its own specific gestures. Rather than being borrowed from the local cultural tradition, their origin is traced to the theatre, and their meaning could be interpreted only by those knowledgeable about that art. The Asian theatre depends almost entirely on such gestures. In other than these instances, the kinesic sign in the theatre is almost exclusively attached to another lexical text. It acquires semantic value when it is in contact with another text, and imparts secondary semantic features onto that text.

In the early presentations of church plays, such as the "Visitatio sepulchri" and the various Nativity plays, the theatrical gestures were always borrowed from the religious ritual and the appropriate service. In the process, a relationship of identity between theatre and ritual was established. The performers were always aware of this and were careful not to impart on their movements any "wordly" reality. In any of the later plays we find notes by directors advising actors on the proper execution of the gestures, so that the performance would not clash with the ritualistic significance of the event.

The kinesic system of a performance of an adaptation forms an extremely significant relationship with the other signifying systems of the text. The semantic essence of the gesture in the performance is constituted in its relationship with the global sign system. It is a constituent unit in the organization of the system. The types of characters, the types of actions, and the manner in which these actions will be performed by the characters are all parts of the prototext's system. The semantic relationship between the kinesic system and the other components of a performance of an adaptation may be one of neutrality, or a relationship of negation, in which case kinesic signs negate the references produced by the other components. The mythological and folklore character, for example, is always armed with a specific set of gestural possibilities and impossibilities. The value of the kinesic gesture performed by an actor in an adaptation of a culturally generated prototext is always determined after it has been projected against the kinesic system of the prototext.

Culture-generated texts such as myths and folktales are also unique because they represent an abstract model of the given culture's reality (attitudes, customs, postulates, values, traditions, propositions, rituals, habits, presumptions, etc.). A cultural prototext, then, can be defined according to Lotman as the "world view" (1975, 100). The codes for the organization and interpretation of cultural texts are provided for in the larger codes of the given culture. Total and successful manipulation of a culture's codes usually implies membership in the culture. A non-member may fail to see any unity in a text generated by a foreign culture. In certain instances some of the norms of a given culture may be mastered through a process of cultural education.

The perception, interpretation and function of culturally generated texts change in the course of time in agreement with changes in the attitude of the perceivers toward those texts. Therefore, how an artistic text such as drama or a theatrical performance is interpreted when it is an adaptation of some cultural text, will be determined largely by the perceiver's attitude toward the cultural prototext.

The essential problem in the interpretation of theatrical messages originating from performances of adaptations is, then, caused by the existence of at least a duplicate set of text sources - the prototext and the metatext. The problem becomes greater when the adaptation is a result of the metacommunication of several generically unrelated texts. The spectator is called upon here to piece together an entire gamut of prototextual referents into a coherent structure.

Complete ignorance of the prototextual elements of the performance forces the perceiver to perceive the text as a primary, underived text, labelling all unrecognizable elements a simply being "foreign" in relation to recognizable elements.

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