

# Different Voices? Film and Text or Film as Text: Considering the Process of Film Adaptation from the Perspective of Discourse

Justine Kemlo

Université Libre de Bruxelles

## *Abstract*

*Adaptation has always held an ambiguous creative position, caught between an original work of art and its subjective re-shaping in another, sometimes vividly different, form. Understanding the phenomenon of adaptation through the analysis of its objects when the 'matters of expression' (Hjelmslev's term) in which they are articulated differ is a problematic, yet underemphasized, issue.*

*In order to fathom the mechanisms of the procedure of adaptation and thus comprehend and possibly redefine the balance of power between the elements present, one must find a methodological framework that supports and allows correlations and therefore contrast. It is only in this fashion that conclusive findings on the nature of adaptation as a process can be gained from observation of adaptations as products.*

*It is my contention that discursive theories, despite obvious but ultimately superficial hindrances such as the variation in semiotic systems, are an adequate model for this type of exploration. The multimodal systemic-functional framework that I eventually propose as most appropriate will first be contrasted against previous approaches (especially traditional theories of discourse analysis and semiotic film theories). This will provide a methodological backdrop against which this framework may be appraised while simultaneously specifying its terms.*

*The focus of the investigation conducted here is to reconsider the definitions of discourse and text, to contemplate whether and where film would fit within these definitions and how it could be used to study adaptation.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Among creative processes, adaptation has always held an ambiguous position, caught between an original work of art and its subjective reshaping in another, sometimes vividly

different, form. This transformation might be considered invasive, claiming for itself, albeit productively, the essence of another's creation. It is a process which has received extensive interest over the last decades and whose span has varied widely. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, has acknowledged the difficulty of addressing the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation (Hutcheon 2006). The definition which she proposes considers adaptation as a product *and* as a process and examines the bi-directional movements between three modes of engagement: telling, showing and interacting. Within the restricted scope of this paper 'adaptation' will designate only the adaptation of literary texts to film, probably the most prolific of all adaptive domains, at least from a critical perspective. It is also worth pointing out that my approach at this stage will be primarily theoretical and exploratory, aiming at identifying and defining a system which can subsequently be illustrated or extended to other more open perceptions of adaptation.

The research done in the field of adaptation from novels to film has tended to focus on issues such as narration, perspective, quantitative and qualitative changes (Carcaud-Macaire & Clerc 2004; Cattrysse 1992; Jost 1987; Peters 1980). But one type of approach seems to have been underemphasized, namely the problematic issue of how to understand the phenomenon of adaptation through the analysis of its objects when the semiotic systems in which they are articulated differ.

In order to fathom the mechanisms of the procedure of adaptation and thus comprehend and possibly redefine the balance of power between the elements present, a methodological framework is needed. It should be flexible enough to allow correlations and therefore contrast between the examined objects. It is only in this fashion that conclusive findings on the nature of adaptation as a process can be gained from observation of adaptations as products. A film cannot be effectively compared to the novel it has been adapted from unless we acknowledge the essential differences at the core of the two systems, all the while finding a way to transcend them. To use Hutcheon's terms, *telling* does not function like *showing* does; but to relate what has been *told* to what has been *shown* is feasible if we find a way of articulating divergences and convergences.

To my knowledge, theories of discourse have seldom been used in the study of adaptation, literary or otherwise. It is my contention that these theories are an adequate — maybe the most adequate — model for this type of exploration, despite obvious but ultimately superficial hindrances such as the variation in semiotic systems. Discursive theories (and more precisely systemic-functional multimodal discourse, as developed below) provide us with a frame and terminology which allow us to comment relevantly on the parallels to be

drawn between text and film using a grounded, less impressionistic model than before. To date, much of the research dealing with adaptation of novels to film has focused on a literary and often on a narrative perspective. Moreover, although some authors have pointed out the need to distinguish between what is directly transferable and what must necessarily be adapted, between the enunciated and the enunciation (McFarlane 1996), no system seems to have emerged that would show us how to make these distinctions, account for them or indeed label them. The discursive model which I propose could bring a new perspective to these matters, systematize them and also open the path to a wide range of implementations, from the specific (novel to film) to the more general (adaptation understood more broadly). This article stops short of illustrating this model. It focuses instead on the process of how exploration of previous theories led up to its adoption and the possibilities it offers at a further stage. What follows is then a — necessarily selective — overview of how adaptation, and more precisely the contrast between adapted literary texts and the resulting adaptations in the form of film-texts (a term which will be further specified and queried below) has been examined by different academic disciplines; from traditional theories of discourse analysis to more recent ones, integrating paths taken by film theoreticians along the way. Within the vast area of film theory, it is especially film semioticians to whom I will refer, since their interest in the essence of the filmic text parallels my endeavour to define and delineate film texts and view them alongside more traditional types of text. This overview will provide a methodological backdrop against which the framework that I eventually propose as most appropriate may be appraised while simultaneously specifying its terms.

By examining features and using theories traditionally pertaining to the field of linguistics at large and more particularly to discourse analysis, and applying them to both literature *and* film, I hope to define elements which, while retaining idiosyncratic features, share distinctive characteristics that may later be contrasted. The scope of my analysis will thus not be restrictively lexico-grammatical but will rather bear on wider concepts such as discourse representation or the notion of texture itself. The first step to take in this direction, and the focus of the investigation conducted here, is precisely to reconsider the definitions of discourse and text, and to contemplate whether and where film would fit within these definitions. Is there a film voice? If so, how can it be characterized, how can it be deconstructed? Does it make sense to do so? Is it different from what is traditionally understood as *text*? When comparing text and film, are we faced with different voices or with variations of one and the same voice?

## 2 FILM(S) AND TEXT(S) OR FILM-TEXTS

Traditional discourse analysis (Jaworski & Coupland 1999; Schiffrin 1994; Brown & Yule 1983) has generally held a rather conventional view of discourse as the analysis of language in use. Some definitions have extended discourse to language beyond use. The object of discourse analysis however, is commonly regarded as consisting of texts, although precise definition of what constitutes text remains elusive. The approach to these texts has, until recently, been overwhelmingly focused on language, disregarding other semiotic systems, meaning-making systems that function beyond or parallel to language or in combination with it. Although the existence of such systems has been posited through the acknowledgment of multimodal texts (Jaworski & Coupland 1999), that is, texts which make use of more than one semiotic system, they have rarely been subjected to analysis due to the metalinguistic obstacles that such an analysis would entail. Thus discourse analysis was perceived as monomodal, the focus being primarily on the already rich perspectives offered by language-centred approaches. This model, with its overriding emphasis on language, left little leeway to consider film as a textual object. We will see below how that focus has recently shifted to accommodate other views on discourse and other systems or texts which enact it.

Before developing these, it is worthwhile taking a detour through semiotic film theories to investigate how the notion of film and ‘film-texts’ has been defined there. Of particular relevance is the fact that research conducted in this field has stemmed from linguistics, extending the theorization of meaning-making language to other semiotic systems.

The founder and inspirational figure of this movement was Christian Metz. Metz’s enquiries into film as language are developed at the level of Saussure’s *langue* rather than exemplified through instances of *parole*. However, his writings frequently hint at the possibility not only of regarding films as textual objects but also of deconstructing, albeit temporarily, these texts into different strata and observing these separately.

In the work which may be considered as the cornerstone of his theory, *Langage et Cinéma* (1977), Metz draws the outlines of a system which he hopes could lay the foundation for a theoretical understanding of filmic processes both from the producer’s and the recipient’s point of view. Defining films as texts is paramount to his approach:

Le seul principe de pertinence susceptible de définir actuellement la sémiologie du film est [...] la volonté de traiter les films comme des *textes*, comme des unités de discours, en s’obligeant par là à rechercher les différents

*systèmes* (qu'ils soient ou non des codes) qui viennent informer ces textes et s'impliciter en eux. Si on déclare que la sémiologie étudie la *forme* des films, ce doit être sans oublier que la forme n'est pas ce qui s'oppose au contenu, et qu'il existe une forme du contenu, tout aussi importante que la forme du signifiant.<sup>1</sup> (1977: 14)

Using Hjelmslev's (1970) theory of the 'matter of expression', he sees these texts as whole signifying objects while also acknowledging the possibility of subdividing them into separate components, labelled as 'sensorial supports'. They are of five kinds: image, musical sound, phonetic sound (in words), noise and writing. Right from the outset, we can see how two of these, words and writing, can comfortably be accommodated within a discursive framework since they allow direct linguistic observation. Image can also prove linguistically relevant insofar as it provides paralinguistic information to supplement other analyses. In a film-text the visual element is a given which allows us to consider dimensions which, in written text, are regrettably lost or at best are typically confined to descriptive comments. Indeed, in the case of adaptations, many essential linguistic clues (accent, prosodic features such as rhythm, intonation, etc.) or extra-linguistic ones (semiotics, proxemics, gestures) can be introduced, regardless of whether they appear — explicitly or otherwise — in the original text.

The fact that Metz chooses to consider these supports globally as one product does not preclude their separate analysis. It is, however, essential never to lose perspective of the whole underlying them. Metz himself hinted at the possibility:

Ce n'est pas parce qu'un message est visuel que tous ses codes le sont; et ce n'est pas parce qu'un code se manifeste dans des messages visuels qu'il ne se manifeste pas aussi ailleurs. Les 'langages' visuels entretiennent avec les autres des liens systématiques qui sont multiples et complexes, et on ne gagne rien à opposer le 'verbal' et le 'visuel' comme deux grands blocs dont chacun

---

<sup>1</sup> The only relevant principle which is capable of defining film semiology today [...] is the will to treat films as *texts*, as unities of discourse, thereby forcing us to research the different *systems* (whether or not these are codes) which inform these texts and become implicit through them. If we declare that semiology studies the *form* of films, we must not forget that form is not opposed to content, and that there is a form of content, just as important as the form of the signifier. (All translations in this paper are by the author).

serait homogène, massif et sans faille, et qui entretiendraient l'un avec l'autre des rapports logiques de pure extériorité.<sup>2</sup> (1977: 24)

Metz uses the label of 'pluri-code' to describe the heterogeneous nature of film which is not contrived but simply a condition for its existence. Other authors have also tackled this issue: Cattrysse (1992) speaks of a 'composite filmic discourse', made up of different sensory series which take place simultaneously; whereas Gardies (1987) considers any media message, film included, as the narrow and interdependent combination of concomitant languages.

What all these definitions have in common is the apparent contradiction between the inextricability of different codes, modes and/or voices and the simultaneous acknowledgment of the composite nature and therefore possible separation of the constitutive elements of this discourse. This conundrum at the core of what constitutes a film-text is proving hard to resolve: although it is implicitly understood and acknowledged, it is yet to be coherently articulated.

It is worth mentioning that the flexibility of Metz's position, which perceived the verbal and the visual as two interacting rather than conflicting forces, has often been disregarded, or worse misunderstood, even by his followers. Later semioticians have indeed tended to consider language and image as two blocks in contrast with each other and therefore have often construed parallels between them as impossible or irrelevant. Among them, Ropars-Wuilleumier has this to say:

Un film n'est pas un texte – est-il encore temps de l'avouer? [...] Entre la littérature et le cinéma, l'assimilation provisoire présuppose un constat de différence, sensible, technique, voire éthique. Mais pas plus que le cinéma ne s'accomplit en soi, loin des signes de sa genèse, pas d'avantage la littérature ne se rend à elle-même, hors le détour d'un reflet où déchiffrer son visage, fût-ce pour le voir se briser. L'écriture, ce facteur ambigu si souvent invoqué, fraye un passage latéral, ménageant du film au texte, du texte au film, les canaux d'une liaison qui, en chaque cas, œuvre à la disjonction du terme joint.<sup>3</sup> (1990: 225)

---

<sup>2</sup> The fact that a message is visual does not mean that all its codes are; and the fact that a code appears in the guise of visual messages does not mean that it doesn't also manifest itself in other forms. Visual 'languages' maintain multiple and complex systematic links to other languages, and nothing can be gained by opposing the 'verbal' and the 'visual' as two great blocks, homogeneous, solid, without faultlines and which, in terms of logic, maintain with each other only purely exterior links.

<sup>3</sup> A film is not a text – can we still admit it? [...] Between literature and film, temporary assimilation presupposes acknowledging an appreciable, technical or even ethical difference. But, just as cinema is not

Even as he steered clear of exemplification, Metz was at once more tolerant and more cautious, conceding the layering and divisibility of filmic ‘sensorial supports’, all the while keeping in mind that it is the film itself which constitutes a text and that any separate analysis (linguistic, for instance) must eventually be re-projected onto a more global canvas. As Jost (1987) points out, a film is never an addition (images + words and sound) but rather a product or result, a double narrative whose two modes of expression are ultimately bound to one another. The use of ‘double’ narrative rather than ‘multiple’, which would seem more appropriate, is Jost’s own.

In the case of adaptation, film theorists have more readily resorted to linguistic frameworks by exploring the parallels that could be drawn with other forms of transfer such as translation. Carcaud-Macaire and Clerc (but also Cattrysse 1992; Helbo 1997), tentatively hinted at this possibility:

D’autre part, on peut considérer que le problème de l’adaptation est un aspect de celui de la traduction. Il permet de mieux comprendre à quel point le langage véhicule une analyse de la réalité qui lui est spécifique et qui diffère sensiblement de celle qui est véhiculée par l’image [...] La non-coïncidence des éléments transposés et le constat général de ‘trahison’ par l’image conduisent à poser la question du nouveau découpage, concurrentiel à celui de la langue et inhérent à l’instrumentation technique, par lequel passe l’adaptation.<sup>4</sup> (2004: 13)

Along the same lines, Cattrysse (1992) attempted to develop a ‘polysystem’ that would accommodate all adaptations from both a synchronic and diachronic perspective. He grounds his theory in existing polysystemic models of translation such as that of Toury (1986):

Translating is an act (or a process) which is performed (or occurs) over and across systemic borders. In the widest of its possible senses it is a series of

---

realised in isolation, far from the signs of its genesis, so literature cannot return to itself without observing, in a roundabout way, the reflection of its face even if it is to find it shattered. Writing, that ambiguous yet frequently cited factor, clears a lateral path arranging, from film to text, and text to film, the channels of a connection which, in each case, works to disconnect the common terms.

<sup>4</sup> The issue of adaptation can be considered as an aspect of the issue of translation. This allows us to understand more clearly to what extent language conveys an analysis of reality which is specifically its own and which is appreciably different from that which image conveys [...] The non-coincidence of the transposed elements and the general assessment of the image as ‘betrayal’ may lead us to wonder about the new division which adaptation supposes, at once competing with language and inherent to technical instrumentation.

operations, or procedures, whereby one semiotic entity, which is a (functional) constituent (element) of a certain cultural (sub)system, is transformed into another semiotic entity, which forms at least a potential element of another cultural (sub)system, providing that some informational core is retained ‘invariant under transformation’, and on its basis a relationship known as ‘equivalence’ is established between the resultant and initial entities. (1986: 1112-13)

For analogies to be drawn between the two processes (translation and adaptation), considering films as texts, as realised discourse(s), is a basic prerequisite. The discrepancy between an *intrasemiotic* process and an *intersemiotic* one nonetheless continues to hinder comparison and, more particularly, metalinguistic description of this comparison. The global view which still prevails is that of a film-text as an intertwined system of layers which it is problematic to unravel.

### 3 MULTIMODALITY: A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL VIEW

Very recently however, some linguists have begun to broach the subject of multimodal discourse and to analyse texts under a newfound perspective.

Taking Halliday’s (1973; 1978; 2004 [1985, 1994]) systemic functional grammar as a starting point, they have sought to apply his instruments to other systems of meaning that are not necessarily, or only partially, linguistic in scope. Thus, subscribing to Halliday’s organisation of meaning into three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) which can be adapted to suit different modes (see for instance O’Toole 1994), they have sought to develop ‘grammars’ which are no longer lexico-grammatical but still reveal a system-structure cycle of paradigmatic choices built into a congruent whole which can in turn be decomposed along a rank scale.

These theories started by extending the conception of language as an isolated phenomenon to include other semiotic, meaning-making, resources. This new outlook initially focused mainly on developing ‘grammars’ of visual design (O’Toole 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]), but was soon widened to comprise other modes. It went as far as including instances of everyday practices of ‘ordinary’ humans known as ‘practically lived texts’ (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). It has also spawned a variety of approaches, from

developing theoretical models (Norris 2004; Lim Fei 2004; O'Toole 2004), to researching systems and types beyond the text or multimodal text analysis proper.

Kress and van Leeuwen's definition of what constitutes multimodality illustrates the openness of this approach, especially in contrast with traditional monomodal discourse analysis:

The traditional linguistic account is one in which *meaning is made once*, so to speak. By contrast, we see the multimodal resources which are available in a culture used to make meanings in any and every sign, at any level, and in any mode. Where traditional linguistics had defined language as a system that worked through *double articulation*, where a message was an articulation as a form and as a meaning, we see multimodal texts as making meaning in multiple articulations. (2001: 4)

This model enables one to view films as composite multimodal *texts*, a perspective which can finally be posited unproblematically within this framework.

Authors who have explored the medium of film within this perspective (Baldry 2004; O'Halloran 2004; Iedema 2001) have sought to deal with the added dimension of dynamicity in film-texts, as opposed, for instance, to multimodal print texts. Over and above the co-deployment of selections within different semiotic meaning-making resources, meaning is made through the temporal and spatial unfolding of these resources which are perceived as a flux rather than an addition of instances (Baldry 2004; Baldry & Thibault 2006; O'Halloran 2008). Baldry (2004) addresses this issue by attempting to develop a new software system that could simultaneously encode the multiple dimensions of film-texts. This system, known as MCA (Multimodal Corpus Authoring) would allow a shift from an in-vitro multimodal transcription, where film is divided into still frames which can be metafunctionally annotated, to an in-vivo transcription where film can be retrieved in its dynamic format and simultaneously contrasted within a relational database. A notable advantage of MCA, as pointed out by the developers, is its ability to contrast multimodal texts, or dimensions of these, with texts previously thought of as monomodal, and to do so through the use of a concordancer. Thus metafunctionally based choices can be analysed both intrasemiotically and intersemiotically. It seems to solve many of the issues previously raised and thus to prove a useful tool with which to study adaptation. It could allow us, for instance, to take a scene from an original novel and compare it with its filmic equivalent. Through a system of

annotation and encoding, we could ascribe different meanings to different elements at play and the concordancer would then allow us to observe convergence and divergence between these meanings. This has already been done solely within the filmic text (Baldry 2004) and by extension a similar program could be used to amalgamate dimensions from different texts, filmic or not. To use a more concrete example, MCA could allow us to correlate systematically the use of a narrative device in a novel (first person narration, for instance) with the use of equivalent (or non-equivalent) filmic devices (different types of shot, focal distances, voice-over, and so on). Unfortunately, this software is still under (re)development. However, the principles which it posits, that is, the use of a systemic-functional terminology and model, may be equally applied to in-vitro transcriptions and therefore provide us with the analytical framework which was keenly sought but which had so far proved elusive. At present, a major research initiative is underway in the Multimodal Analysis Lab in Singapore to develop new approaches to systemic-functional multimodal analysis of film texts using interactive digital media, incorporating computer science approaches into multimodal analysis (O'Halloran 2008).

Using a systemic-functional framework opens the path to a comparative examination where texts, both in their traditional linguistic form and as film-texts, can be contrasted along the same metafunctional guidelines, even when the systems or semiotic resources which enact them are at variance.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Thus, in different ways and to different extents, both discourse analysis, especially multimodal discourse, and semiotic theories of film collude in strengthening our understanding of film(s) as text(s). The variation in semiotic systems is not *per se* an obstacle to understanding the processes underlying film adaptation if we accept a system of analysis which is target-oriented. Acknowledging the composite nature of this/these discourse(s) allows us to view and analyse its elements separately, as long as we heed the fact that it is the film itself which constitutes a text and that any specific observations (at any rank within a systemic-functional framework, for instance) must eventually be contemplated against the *Gestalt* of the text. Films can then be deconstructed into their constitutive elements (sensorial supports, semiotic systems) and these can offer ground for meaningful comparison with other, more traditional, types of text. In other words, the voice of a film is not one voice but a

polyphony of voices, whose melody is heard simultaneously but whose individual tracks can be isolated and compared to others, thus helping us reach a deeper understanding of the tune.

- Baldry, Anthony. 2004. 'Phase and Transition, Type and Instance: Patterns in Media Texts as Seen through a Multimodal Concordancer,' in O'Halloran (2004b): 83-108
- Brown, G. & G. Yule. 1983. *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Carcaud-Macaire, Monique & Marie-Jeanne Clerc. 2004. *L'Adaptation cinématographique et littéraire* (Paris: Klincksieck)
- Catrysse, Patrick. 1992. *Pour une théorie de l'adaptation filmique* (Berne: Peter Lang)
- Gardies, René. 1987. *Paroles aux images: D'un média à l'autre* (Paris: Colin)
- Genette, Gérard. 1982. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil)
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1973. *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (London: Arnold)
- 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (London: Arnold)
- 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold)
- Helbo, André. 1997. *L'adaptation du théâtre au cinéma* (Paris: Masson and Colin)
- Hjelmslev, Louis. 1970. *Language: An Introduction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press)
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge)
- Iedema, R. 2001. 'Analysing Film and Television: A Social Semiotic Account of *Hospital: An Unhealthy Business*,' in *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, ed. by T. van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (London: Sage), 183-204
- Jaworski, Adam & Nicolas Coupland (eds). 1999. *The Discourse Reader* (London: Routledge)
- Jost, François. 1987. *L'Oeil caméra: Entre film et roman* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon)
- Kress, Gunther & Theo van Leeuwen. 2001. *Multimodal Discourse* (London: Arnold)
- 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge)
- Lim Fei, V. 2004. 'Developing an Integrative Multi-Semiotic Model,' in O'Halloran (2004b): 220-46
- McFarlane, Brian. 1996. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Metz, Christian. 1977. *Langage et cinéma* (Paris: Albatros)
- Norris, Sigrid. 2004. 'Multimodal Discourse Analysis: A Conceptual Framework,' in *Discourse and Technology: Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, ed. by P. Levine & R. Scollon (Washington: Georgetown University Press), 101-15
- O'Halloran, Kay. 2004a. 'Visual Semiosis in Film,' in *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, (see O'Halloran), 109-30
- 2009. 'Multimodal Analysis and Digital Technology,' in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Multimodality: Theory and Practice*, ed. by A. Baldry & E. Montagna (Campobasso: Palladino), n.p.
- O'Halloran, Kay, ed. 2004b. *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Systemic-Functional Perspectives* (London: Continuum)
- O'Toole, Michael. 1994. *The Language of Displayed Art* (London: Leicester University Press)
- 2004. 'Opera Ludentes: The Sydney Opera House at Work and Play,' in O'Halloran (2004b): 11-27
- Peters, J. M. 1980. *Van woord naar beeld: De vertaling van romans in film* (Muiderberg: Countinho)
- Ropars-Wuilleumier, Marie-Claire. 1990. *Écraniques: Le film du texte* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille)
- Schiffrin, Deborah. 1994. *Approaches to Discourse* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Toury, Gideon. 1986. 'Translation: A Cultural-Semiotic Perspective,' in *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, ed. by T. A. Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter), 1111-24