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Visual metaphor as an intersemiotic translation technique: the case of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*

On "dangerous liaisons" between literature and film

There are many concepts concerning relations between literature and film: from the concept assuming that film is only one of the "manifestations" of literature (the concept of "przyliterackość" by Bolesław Lewicki) to the one assuming that it is completely autonomous; moreover, that it influences the literature. The most balanced concept, at least among Polish Film Studies researchers, has been formulated by Maryla Hopfinger, who claims that the two domains are developing together, influencing each other, as if "intertwined", making it impossible – today – to say which one inspires the other more strongly.

However, notwithstanding the perspective a researcher may adapt, it is impossible to dismiss all the similarities between narrative techniques applied both in literature and film, e.g. the basic function of the plot (of course, there are exceptions, but it is a topic for a separate discussion) in both film and literature[1]; but there are also many similarities between

[1] As the fact that there are also obvious differences stemming from the very material, or essence, of these two arts, such as the natural narrative distance in literature,

rhetorical and poetic aspects of both domains; in other words: literature and film use many similar techniques to tell their stories, but above all, they use similar techniques to evoke emotions in their audience. Regardless of whom we ask: Aristotle, Maryla Hopfinger, Walter Murch or Allan Starski – it is the emotional aspect that is always the most important when telling a story.

Thus, there are two basic factors: plot and emotions – and these are the bases for comparison between film and literature, and also the baseline for my short analysis. In this paper, I will start with pointing out a few key issues related to intersemiotic translation in the context briefly discussed above, then pass on to visual metaphor: its structure, types, and possible functions, and finally – to case studies that will illustrate how filmmakers use the visual metaphor in their work.

Intersemiotic "transcription"

According to Seweryna Wysłouch (and Maryla Hopfinger before her), the intersemiotic translation – or film adaptation of, say, a novel – is, of course, possible as concerns the plot level. But the original plot and the adaptation will never be the same, as

> A novel is not only a story, stripped of the narrative. Even in cases where the plot is the basic element, what is crucial are the meanings suggested by the way of telling the story – the narrative […]. Therefore, the very fabric of language, the discourse, can be an obstacle, as this fabric cannot be mechanically translated into pictures [Wysłouch, 2013: 294, translated by the author].

There are also more obvious obstacles, e.g. the runtime of a motion picture which is maximum 2-3 hours, whereas in a novel the time can be (almost) unlimited – but they will be discussed further on. Due to all these obstacles, Wysłouch compares the process to transcription, taking place on the rhetorical level.

There are many time-honoured techniques applied by filmmakers that together constitute a sort of "cinema language" (a sort of, as it has

very difficult to obtain on screen due to the "present" nature of iconic signs which constitute the very tissue of the film.

never been codified in its entirety), that can also be regarded as intersemiotic translation techniques, among which one of the most interesting and multi-functional is the visual metaphor in its many forms.

Is it possible to "see metaphorically"?

As in most cases, researchers who study the concept of visual metaphor use Lakoff and Johnson's "domains" as their point of departure, as well as the idea that metaphor is not a matter of language, but a matter of thought [see e.g. Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2012: 97]. Therefore, this type of metaphor is also based on the source domain and the target domain, but since metaphor is a matter of thought – those domains may manifest themselves not only in verbal form.

However, visual metaphor as such is not so young a concept: one of the first to analyze its mechanism was Virgil C. Aldrich. In his 1968 paper, he studies the structure of visual metaphor within the context of Fine Arts: he talks of two domains, one of which is an image. He also analyzes the mental process that allows us to perceive the visual metaphor – the process that Lakoff and Johnson will later refer to as "mapping" of conceptual domains. Aldrich calls it "the process of seeing-as" [Aldrich, 1968: 75].

More recent studies, e.g. those carried out by Charles Forceville and two Dutch scholars, Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja, further developed those models, distinguishing many types of metaphors and analyzing their possible applications in motion pictures. In their 2012 paper, Coëgnarts and Kravanja described six pairs of features that are crucial when determining the type of metaphor in films [Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2012: 98-103]:

1. TYPE: structural-conceptual vs. image (mapping of conceptual domains vs. mapping of images)
2. QUALITY: abstract vs. concrete
3. MODALITY: monomodal vs. multimodal (how we perceive the metaphor: pictures, written/spoken signs, gesture, sound…)
4. DIRECTION: symmetry vs. asymmetry (reversibility of domains)
5. SPATIALITY: homospatiality vs. non-homospatiality
6. REALITY: filmic vs. ante-filmic (reality depicted in the film vs. reality we live in)

Most of the metaphors we encounter, especially in motion pictures, are multimodal, since film itself is multimodal (as we are taught by Christian Metz – see e.g. Metz, 1971).

The two authors also distinguish a more general category of “film metaphor”: it is a visual metaphor that may be classified as one of the abovementioned types, but that exists primarily because one of filming techniques was applied, e.g. editing, special effect, or color balance change.

Why do filmmakers need visual metaphors?

When adapting a novel, writers and directors need to “tailor” the story (and the narrative) to the needs of the screen. It may be a painful process, stripping the adapted work of all its charm, but in can also be creative, enabling filmmakers to convey new meanings of the literary original. In the table below, I present some of the limitations that they have to face – some of them may seem obvious, but nevertheless, it is an overview of the most important problems that filmmakers evoke in numerous interviews (see e.g. Starski, 2013; Murch, 2006).

Literature	**Film**
Time: unlimited	Time: max. 3 hours
Number of plots/characters: (almost) unlimited	Number of plots/characters: limited
Ambiguity	Concretization
It is possible to present or describe practically everything.	There are things that cannot be shown on screen.

Some of these obstacles can be overcome through visual metaphors, as images – especially today, when we are able to “re-watch” movies as many times as we wish – can have a fast and striking impact, particularly in the hands of visionary directors, writers, and camera operators.

Metaphors allow filmmakers to:

1. make a „shortcut” or a time-saving allusion;

2. convey new meanings or evoke associations;
3. replace lengthy descriptions;
4. quickly „sneak in" some new elements that can enrich the original.

Naturally, there are many other aspects, and each film may use those strategies differently; even more so if its creators choose to adapt literature that is not based on plot [Wysłouch, 2013: 303].

Let us move on to analytical part, where I shall further discuss the issues whose theoretical grounds were described above, on the basis of two case studies from Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*: metaphor "light is good/dark is evil" and a more complex example of "split personality" metaphor, represented here by the character of Sméagol/Gollum.

Case studies: visual metaphor in *The Lord of the Rings*

1. Light and darkness

The first metaphor I would like to discuss, "light is good/dark is evil", has already been evoked by Charles Forceville [2013]; however, his paper focuses mainly on the lighting of the set, on the scenery, while completely dismissing the role of light and darkness in relation to characters, especially Elves; I shall therefore attempt to prove the importance of this particular metaphor for the novel as well as the adaptation.

Nevertheless, Forceville does observe one crucial issue: light-dark is not a "one-time" creative metaphor, but an entire conceptual domain that became a global, dominating metaphor in the whole picture [Forceville, 2013: 3].

The quotations I used for my analysis come from both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, as the latter fulfills the role of an "encyclopedia" of Middle-Earth, explaining facts and phenomena present in Tolkien's universe, and Jackson openly admitted that he had meant to add at least certain information from *The Silmarillion* to his movie.

The first passage I shall present describes Lúthien, one of the fairest Elves, whose deeds strongly influenced the history of Middle-Earth:

> […] wandering in the summer in the woods of Neldoreth [Beren] came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian, at a time of evening under moonrise […]. Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but **her eyes were grey as the starlit evening**; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers […]. As the **light upon the leaves of trees**, as the voice of clear waters, as the **stars above the mists of the world**, such was her glory and her loveliness; **and in her face was a shining light** [J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*].

And another – on Galadriel, queen of Elves, and her husband Celeborn:

> A sister they had, Galadriel, most beautiful of all the house of Finwë; her hair was **lit with gold** as though it had caught in a mesh the **radiance** of Laurelin [*The Silmarillion*].

> They were clad wholly in white; and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold, and the hair of the Lord Celeborn was of silver long and bright; but no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as **lances in the starlight**, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory [*The Fellowship of the Ring*].

The last quote is about the "fading" of the Elf-kind:

> Those of the Elven-race that lived still in Middle-earth waned and faded, and Men usurped the sunlight. Then the Quendi wandered in the lonely places of the great lands and the isles, and **took to the moonlight and the starlight**, and to the woods and caves, becoming as shadows and memories, save those who ever and anon set sail into the West and vanished from Middle-earth [*The Silmarillion*].[2]

Throughout the trilogy and *The Silmarillion*, light is associated with beautiful, kind and wise Elves; meanings of their names are also related to light (Galadriel – "maiden crowned with a radiant garland"; Gil-Galad – "star of bright light"; princess Arwen is called the Evenstar of her people, etc.); they worship the light of stars; therefore, Jackson and his film crew decided to use this fact and make the Elves seem more "a trick of light" than living beings [Sibley, 2002: 88].

Jackson's filmic Elves seem to glow, especially in scenes in which their overwhelming, intimidating power is shown. This strategy can be

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2 Emphasis added by the author.

construed as a film metaphor LIGHT IS GOOD, as it required the use of a typically cinematographic tool: color and brightness balance has been "tampered with" in post-editing. It is also a conceptual metaphor, as the target domain is a conceptual domain, as well as a multimodal metaphor – consisting of an image and an abstract domain.

Fig. 1 and 2. Galadriel and Arwen in *The Lord of the Rings* (source: Sibley, 2002)

The other domain – darkness – evokes more typical associations. All the characters and the bestiary related to Mordor and Sauron, i.e. everything that is evil and wicked, or sad, has something dark about it: the Black Riders' costumes, the towers of Minas Morgul and Barad-dur in Mordor, the depths of the mines of Moria… The quotations I have chosen in order to illustrate it, come, once again, from *The Silmarillion*. The first one concerns Ungoliant, an enormous and evil spider that lived in Mordor and served the first Dark Lord: "A cloak of **darkness** she wove about them when Melkor and Ungoliant set forth: an **Unlight** […]" [*The Silmarillion*].

And the other describes the diminishing of the race of Men:

> And until that time came the shards of Elendil's sword were given into the keeping of Elrond, when the days of the Dúnedain **darkened** and they became a wandering people [*The Silmarillion*].

One of the most suggestive images of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is a creature called Balrog, also referred to as "the Shadow and the Flame", a beast of darkness and pure malice, that Forceville associates with Hell [Forceville, 2013: 9].

Fig. 3. Balrog in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (source: Sibley, 2002)

The type of metaphor is the same as in the case of the light: a conceptual, multimodal, film metaphor. Although darkness is associated with many different concepts in the movie, this metaphor is achieved with the same methods as the former. It can therefore be assumed that the opposition of light and dark was a conceptual domain conceived by the filmmakers as an overall strategy for the whole film.

What Forceville did not observe, however, is the fact that the metaphor based on the opposition of light and dark can be developed even further – because whenever the Ring is worn, the one who bears it sees an "upside-down" world. The relation between light and darkness (and, as a consequence, of good and evil) is reversed: one metaphor (light and dark) gives birth to another (the Ring reverses all concepts and values).

To sum up this part, the analyzed metaphor was chosen by Jackson[3] to convey all the associations that appear in the novel, between the Elves and the good and the light, as well as between everything that is

[3] Naturally, Peter Jackson is mentioned herein as a sort of metonymy; every motion picture is a result of work of hundreds of people, and although we usually know their names, it is impossible to discern from whom a given concept came: in this case, the technique might have been invented by Jackson himself, as well as by writers, camera operators, editors, costume designers…

evil – death, enemies, monsters – and darkness; referring to the functions I mentioned above, those techniques may be construed as "replacement of descriptions" and "conveying associations".

2. Sméagol/Gollum

> […] Even Gollum was not wholly ruined […]. There was **a little corner of his mind that was still his own**, and light came through it, as through a chink in the dark […]. But that, of course, would only make the **evil part of him** angrier in the end – unless it could be conquered […]. But **the thing** was eating up his mind, and the torment had become almost unbearable [*The Fellowship of the Ring*].

In the novel, Gollum is a character with a split personality: Sméagol, the "original" personality – is a rather harmless, fearful, simple creature; and Gollum – the "new" personality created by the Ring (that, as we have already seen in the previous part, reverses, corrupts and ruins everything that is good into evil or sadness) is an entirely new person, who is cunning, malicious, even cruel. The two "beings" are in a constant fight, and only in the end does the weak Sméagol surrender to the vicious Gollum. The quotation above is a description of the creature made by Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. As it is impossible to translate such reflections into images, and there is not enough time in the film to allow Gandalf to make such a profound analysis of Sméagol's personality in a dialogue, Jackson, his camera operator, and the actor who played Gollum – Andy Serkis – decided to use various "tricks" to allow the audience to distinguish them: in some scenes, when the two personalities argue, Gollum is shown from a different angle than Sméagol; in others, Serkis changes his tone of voice; and in the breakthrough scene, in which Gollum finally prevails over Sméagol, Jackson used a classic technique: the conversation between the two personalities takes place by a lake, and Sméagol talks to his reflection in the water. The metaphor that we encounter here can be referred to as "my reflection is the other me": yet another film metaphor (as it was created with an image, in connection with editing techniques, and was complemented by the voice of Andy Serkis). Although it is a "one-time metaphor", it gives rise to numerous intertextual connotations. The metaphor using a character's reflection (in a mirror, in the water, etc.) as a domain denoting “the other” – another personality – or a truth about someone’s intentions, is often employed by filmmakers. Apart from the role of mirrors in *Dangerous Liaisons* directed by Stephen Frears (1988), one of the best-known scenes following the above-mentioned scheme is a monologue from *Taxi Driver* directed by Martin Scorsese (1975[4]), in which the main character talks to his reflection in the mirror, pretending it to be his “original” personality.

In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, the role of this metaphor is – again – the time-saving function, but perhaps also an intertextual allusion for filmgoers, evoking connotations and conveying new meanings.

To sum up, the translation dominant for intersemiotic translation (or, as some scholars have it, intersemiotic “transcription”) can be found at the rhetoric level, which is a point of intersection between plot and emotions. Hence, the metaphor is one of the legitimate translation (or transcription/adaptation) procedures. Even one single metaphor can evoke many interpretations and convey many meanings at the same time. Still, there are many other elements that contribute to the meanings conveyed by visual metaphors (stemming from the multimodal nature of film), such as soundtrack or sound effects; it is, however, too broad a subject to be pursued in this paper. A question also remains: is metaphor always clear and straightforward for each type of audience? Does it actually allow for different interpretations? Or perhaps is it an unnecessary embellishment, obscuring rather than explaining things to the spectator? The answer, as it usually happens when it comes to evaluation of film techniques, depends on the skills of the film crew, but also on the type of the target audience.

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Summary

Literature and film, since the birth of the latter, have been developing together and influencing one another. Although incomparable on the constructional level, those two arts are similar in nature. Narrative techniques applied in literature and film are interrelated: they use many similar techniques to tell their stories, but above all, they use similar techniques to evoke emotions in their audience. In their analyses, Film Studies researchers often evoke two basic factors: plot and emotions – these are the bases for comparison between film and literature, for discerning intersemiotic translation techniques, and also the baseline for my short analysis. In this paper, I will start with pointing out a few key issues related to intersemiotic translation in the context briefly discussed above, then pass on to visual metaphor: its structure, types, and possible functions, and finally – to case studies that will illustrate how filmmakers use the visual metaphor in their work: “light is good/dark is evil” metaphor and the case of Sméagol/Gollum’s split personality in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy directed by Peter Jackson.

Keywords: intersemiotic translation, visual metaphor, film

Streszczenie

Metafora wizualna jako technika przekładu intersemiotycznego na przykładzie *Władcy Pierścieni*

Od początków swego istnienia film rozwijał się równocześnie z literaturą, a oba rodzaje sztuki wpływały na siebie nawzajem. Choć trudno je porównać na poziomie konstrukcji, mają podobną naturę. Wykorzystują podobne techniki narracyjne – zarówno„opowiadania historii, jak i budzenia emocji u odbiorców. W niniejszym artykule omawiam podstawowe zagadnienia związane z przekładem intersemiotycznym i z metaforą wizualną, po czym analizuję przypadki jej zastosowania przez reżyserów filmowych: metaforę „światło jest dobre / ciemność jest zła" oraz rozszczepioną osobowość Sméagola/Golluma w filmie Petera Jacksona *Władca Pierścieni*.

Słowa kluczowe: przekład intersemiotyczny, metafora wizualna, film