

# Mass Communicator

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## TRANSLATABILITY OF FILMS: A CRITIQUE

### THE LANGUAGES OF CINEMA

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In 20th century cinema emerged as the largest mass media round the world. Throughout the digital and artistic revolution in cinematic industry it is inherited as a transnational tool of the artist-director relationship based on its consumption and reception as a capitalist product. The politics of culture and nation is intrinsic in the verbal and non-verbal translation of the cinematic languages where translation, nation and language have been embodied as a composite area of the postcolonial readings. The present study attempts to evaluate the politics of the cultural nation as conceived in Michael Wood's "The Language of Cinema" (2005).

In an age of globalisation the emergence of individual nation-state and the entity of the political language communities brings in a challenging task where translation, nation and language is seen as a difficult area of postcolonial studies. Emerging as the largest mass medium in the twentieth century, cinema has its own languages. The idea of mass medium and translatability in the changing times demands a close reading of the languages those exist in between the texts in the verbal and the nonverbal languages of cinema. Michael Wood's essay "The Language of Cinema" (2005) studies silence tracks and sound tracks, close and long shots of films in different languages in distinct cultures. Wood speaks of the translatability in cinema by looking into the images and visual translation of the tracks, music, costume and language of cinema. His analysis is based on comparative study of two adapted films of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1603-1606), *Ran* (1982) in Japanese by Akira Kurosawa and *King Lear* (1971) in Russian by Grigori Kozintsev. Both these films are adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*. Wood examines the different aspects of cultural translation and translation from medium to medium.

#### Languages, Translation and Cinema

Looking into both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of the film language, Wood debates on the cinematic approach of the languages of the silent films and the sound films. To define languages of film he has taken into consideration the sound tracks, title cards, titles, sub-titles and representational images etc. of different films. His addressing of the issue of translation in films concerns the translatability and the issue of national culture involved in the production of the films. He initiates his argument by locating viewership of cinema in the site of different sign systems in visuals and sound tracks where he sums up the

function of the national culture. Wood discusses the on screen sign-system and the public space where he notes: As my title suggests, I do not want to prolong that question, but mainly, I want to consider the issue of translation in film: what is being translated onto film; how viewers translate among the different sign-systems they are seeing on a screen (and hearing on a sound track); how and when national cultures count and do not count (Wood: 2005: 79).

Wood takes into consideration the cinematic version of Grigori Kozintsev's *King Lear* (1971), translated by Boris Pasternak from English into Russian and music composed by Dmitri Pasternak. He analyses different shots and sound track of the film and ascribes a definite background to it from view point of a cinematic interpretation. His serious concern about this film is its use of language and its translation from English into Russian. The English subtitles of the film and the Russian dialogues in the sound track are of two different and distinct versions. The English subtitles on screen are from William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) and the speech or the dialogues and the conversations in the film are Russian from Pasternak's translated version of *King Lear* (1971). Wood has an argument:

This unusually complicated relationship of Russian to English, and off screen speech to screen text, opens up a whole range of questions about language and translation in film, although the questions take on their full force only when we remember larger context of the presentation:

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printed credits, chanting voice, noises off, black and white moving images, sound of horn, music in the sound track, difficulty of correlating images, hillside and castle, crowd and horsemen, speech in Russian and text in English (Wood 2005: 80).

Wood takes into consideration the casting of the Russian film version of *King Lear*. People on the hill side appearing in the beginning of the film are created to accommodate the unforgettable wretches of *King Lear*'s kingdom. On Kozintsev's silver screen they represent Shakespeare's "wretches, wheresoe'er you are". They bear in them Shakespeare's historical sense of kingdom and land.

Wood also looks into the visuals and the sound track of Japanese version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Ran* (1985) directed by Kurusowa and music composed by Toru Takemitsu. The time, space, settings and background of the film are very much the same as the Kozintsev's version of *King Lear* except that the film has adapted to the existing Japanese traditional & cultural practices. Instead of Russian warriors and horsemen there are Japanese Samurais; both the films have their protagonist, a community leader or a king who takes interest in hunting and lives life in jest. Music in both the films is different and also the costumes, gestures, postures and language is distinct. Story line in both the films is same for example division of the kingdom among the children and the banishment of the younger son or daughter as occurs in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Most of the characters in both the versions have traditional names instead of an English name. Both the films start in the same manner beginning with waiting for an expedition; hunting, raid, memoirs of wars. There is a twist in the narrative in Kurusowa's *Ran* than the Russian version; instead of three daughters the Japanese version of *King Lear* has three sons. Woods comments:

More discursively, Kurusowa like Kozintsev is giving us in imagery, a deep story that Shakespeare's text only hints at (Wood: 2005: 82).

Both the films epitomize more than the stage production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Wood advocates for translation from the English play into the respective Japanese and Russian films. The whole process of production of the films comprises of a 'double translation'; from culture to culture and from medium to medium. Through portrayal of the film English nation is translated into Russian state and its characters do resemble Shakespeare's characters. Wood advocates:

The cultural translation is easy enough to track, and translation seems close enough to the right word.

Shakespeare's ancient England becomes Kozintsev's Renaissance Russia; *Lear*'s time becomes Shakespeare's time (Wood: 2005: 82).

Wood discusses the location of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the play's Russian adaptation. The fictional text is written keeping in mind the real settings and the film is produced by capturing the fictional time and space through a montage that lasts for two hours. English nation has been adapted into ancient Japan, Wood relocates Kurusowa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) an adapted version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Folio: 1623). Both *Ran* and *Throne of Blood* produce violent, intolerant, less courtly and less Christian sense than its source plays. Characters in *Ran* repeatedly invoke pagan Gods and the translation of three daughters into three sons brings forth a massive cultural difference. Japan was never a Christian state; the Pagan Gods have more religious importance than Shakespeare's Christian Gods. In ancient Japan there was no dominant political power structure where a woman could rule the state or be head of a community whereas the English nation has been ruled by women even before Shakespeare's time. The protagonist in *Ran* is not the king, nor his sons, but wife of his first son and mistress of his second son, lady Kaede.

It is a difficult task to locate the translation from one medium another because each has its own merits and demerits. Wood specifies the transformation of different mediums of representation of Shakespeare's text. Wood comments: One of the things these films must necessary be, apart from films, is not-the-play. We think of the live bodies, physical space, real time, and the triumph and failures of stage illusion – that unmistakable, never precisely repeated gesture, that terrible makeup. A film has none of this, and in films based on Shakespeare we remember this absence (Wood: 2005: 83).

Film is a commercial medium which constitutes language of the narrative and its translation. Wood states that the notion of translation will remain with this commercial medium though the cinema may or may not have a notion of impact. Wood agrees to the translatability inherent in cinematic medium. He speaks of Kozintsev's creation of reality by using hour long montages. The processes of reality in both the adaptations are born out of the montages. The existence of a national style of film in every nation or state is a debateable statement because of the individual creativity and challenges of technology involved in the production of the medium. Kozintsev is well acquainted with the style of Kurusowa, Dreyer, Welles, Buñuel and Fellini, but he strictly remains a follower of Russian tradition

of film making. Wood compares Kozintsev's *King Lear* and Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1942, 1945). He finds Kozintsev falling in the tradition of Eisenstein. In the making of *King Lear*, Kozintsev uses English costumes, but the actors create ambience Russian in gesture and posture. Kurusowa's using of moments of silences as a technique to create special effects in *Ran* produce a sound that is considerably Japanese in taste.

On style of the films, Wood observes that style elements in the film may have a nationalistic mark, but their very idea is international. Wood also explores into the relationship between the idea of national and international style in films. He notes:

But style is not the same as language, and it is worth recalling the elements of film language we have glanced at so far; noises, voices, music, black and white images, images in colour, pictures of humans, of animals, of landscape, of castles, of tents, dialogues about rule and division, changing faces, sudden gestures. Many of these elements are going to be national in particular cases, but in principle, and described as generally as I have just described them, they are international (Wood 2005: 84).

On the fundamental nature of the style in cinema Wood argues that the functions of the style in cinema from 'general to particular' may be understood by taking into consideration the relationship that exists in between a word and its referent. The word 'Lear' has two functions; it defines the king who has three daughters, who ruled and divided his kingdom and its referent defines the actor who acted as Lear, his face, his gesture and posture and his individualistic traits. Wood also compares the stage and readership of the text. In stage and literary text the viewer or the reader actualizes the version of the characters which may not be the parameter of the film. He looks into the notion of 'general to particular' in Henry Fielding and Roland Barthes. The general in film is translatable and is realized by interpreting the complex particular. The digital image and digital sound is understood by resemblance and it differs from a word. The digital image or sound is not a purely conventional sign whereas the word is the former that reconstructs our understanding and interpretation. Wood examines Barthes take on the 'sign-system' in photography and film:

And Barthes claim about photography tells us something important about the cinema – that is about the history and theory of moving images prior to the digital age. In the cinema the referent (often) adheres not only because of what we know about the technology that produces the images but because the screen and the sound track are full

of referents, of signs that have not made it all the way into "signhood" (Wood: 2005: 84-85).

Wood locates various sign systems which have meanings and are translatable in the films. The sound track and images are translated into words, into candidates for words and it is a continuous process in films. He compares Barthes' claim of referent with Benjamin's idea of photography. Benjamin does not agree to Barthes' construction of the idea of the referent. He claims that photography is a mechanical production and does not produce an art in reality and hence cannot have a sign system of its own. Its process of development and representation refuses actuality. Same can be ascribed to the movie camera; it is a mechanical reproduction. Wood examines the beginning of the story in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1986), where Sherlock Holmes is called an "observing machine" and after the story moves on the conversation in between Holmes and Watson makes a clear distinction in between seeing and observing. Wood remarks: "Observing" is not reflection or intelligence, it is just better seeing (Wood 2005: 85).

Marcel Proust's observations about the camera and its mechanical image reveal more than what Benjamin and Barthes claims. As per Proust, camera defamiliarizes reality and it reveals human tricks. It tells the very truth that human beings are conspiring to deny. Wood examines a passage from Proust's narrator's glimpse of his grandmother. He compares several statements on the prospect of art, photography and camera and agrees that photography too is an art and is capable of creating its signhood in the films. Wood notes: This is an art too, of course, but an art that announces its insufficiency, its dependence on a merely material, untransformed world. Its realm is the real that is not natural, as Kozintsev says: a place of incomplete signs, in Barthes' sense; of contingency, in Benjamin's; of (almost) unthought, unedited perceptions, as in Proust's narrator's glimpse of his grandmother (Wood: 2005: 87).

There exists a relation in between sound and the imagery patterns. Both of them produce a language that is translatable in the film. Wood agrees that the introduction of the sound tracks in the twenties in silence films changed the reckoning of the viewership of cinema. He examines the various courses of sound patterns in sound film; dialogues, dubbing sounds, sub titles etc. All of them together make a 'film-text'. Everything we observe, see and feel presented in a film is understood more prominently in the form of sound. Dialogues emerged as one prominent components of the film that dominated the story lines, visual emotions, jokes etc. Translation make the films reach

to a wider audience. Wood also looks into seven minute silence sequence of *Ran* which has no dialogue and the sound effect is very slow, it moves with Mahler-influenced orchestral music. The sequence in the film is that of Lord Hidetora being attacked by his two elder sons; in the background the audience hears horse neighing, soldiers shouting and guns fired, arrows hit the castle wall, soldiers fail to death, the occupants of the castle yell. The silence in the shot is very sudden; along with several sounds the music rises and every sound pattern goes silent. By the next shot; Hidetora's elder son arrives in the courtyard and a slow music follows the sequence. All of a sudden the sound retains its loudness with a gunshot killing Taro. Wood comments on Kurusowa technique:

Kurusowa's metaphors are both visual and aural; a scene of carnage and sounds both heard and unheard. Death and betrayal are hell, and hell is silence, the dream-like muffling of the noises of the world, a place where even extreme violence cannot make itself heard (Wood: 2005: 87-88).

Wood argues that translatability of the silence sequence of Kurusowa's *Ran* is most complex. He observes that many elements in the film are local and untranslatable, local and translatable, not local at all but not translatable, or translated into a mosaic of cosmic pattern. The cast in an ancient Japanese costume very well produces a glimpse of the English *Lear* and the ancient traditional Japanese music produces a suitable background of the film. Wood comments that the translation alone does not depend upon the costume, sound, setting etc.; there exists a politics in translation. He agrees that the imperial outlook of the west does not allow the translation of Kurusowa's film to its maximum, the international takes over the national.

## Conclusion

Michael Wood's "The Languages of Cinema" provides a methodology to analyse cinematic languages and its translatability within cultures and mediums. Wood's examination of translatability of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in adaptation into Russian film *King Lear* and Japanese film *Ran* brings into light the cultural translation of cinematic languages and the complex nature of translation involved in translating film languages from medium to medium. Wood's analytical study brings into notice the arguments of Barthes, Benjamin and Proust. Wood agrees that different sign systems exist in the languages of cinema which allows the translatability of the cinema. Cultural nationalism and imperialistic ideas bring in a challenge for translation of the film languages. But the truth is that in the age of globalisation and multi culture cinema being the

largest mass media is translated more frequently. It brings forth a multiple layer of meanings by translation of both verbal and nonverbal cinematic languages. The politics of cinematic translation every time attempts the 'national' in the film to reach it 'internationally'.

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