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Literary Translation and Cultural Memory

This article intends to investigate the relationship between literary translation and cultural memory, using a twentieth century film version of one of Shakespeare's plays as a case study in inter-semiotic translation. The common perception of translation is often confined to its use as a language learning tool or as a means of information transfer between languages. The wider academic concept embraces not only inter-lingual translation, but both intra-lingual activity or rewording in the same language and inter-semiotic translation defined by Roman Jacobson as "the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson, 1959: 114).

Cultural memory functions as the individual translator's resource for situating a literary translation within the confines of existing cultural capital and for writing forward a translation from its source context to its target context. At the target end of the process, the cultural memory shared by the receivers is not only essential in the decoding and relating of the translation to its new context, but is itself authenticated and promoted by the addition of the translation as a memory or memorial narrative of the "original" source text or event.

It seems that the relationship between translation and memory works on two levels, the individual level and the collective level. The individual level is concerned with the translator and his or her personal linguistic capacity and literary experience. Linguistic capacity or the working memory of the translator sets the limitations of the translation, since bi-lingual processing is more demanding than a monolingual task (Macizo and Bajo, 2005:25) and requires a far greater vocabulary. The literary experience or cultural memory of translators influences both their reading of the

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source text and their capacity to identify and recreate the complexity of the content. In other words the translator requires the working memory to read and decode the text linguistically then the cultural memory to identify textual references and facilitate understanding of the source text on a deeper than word surface level. The process of understanding is in itself is an act of translation as George Steiner pointed out decades ago in the opening chapter of *After Babel*. Steiner defines the usual model of translation as a process by which a message from a source language is transferred to the target language. The usual barrier is that of the difference between languages but "exactly the same model – and this is what is rarely stressed - is operative within a single source language (Steiner, 1975, 1998: 29)." Once understanding is achieved the next part of the process of translation requires that cultural memory should work on a collective level. The creative translator may employ the shared cultural capital to rewrite the source text and connect with the receivers in a way that references the target culture.

With the move away from a purely linguistic approach to translation studies in the 1980s towards a more culture directed analysis (see Snell-Hornby 2006) domestication into the target culture system became one of the ways in which translated texts were made to appeal to a wider audience. Some critics have viewed such a process as appropriation and oppose what they consider to be "a global hegemony of English" (Venuti, 1998:10-11). The counter argument points out that market forces require products that the reader/consumer will buy because they recognise and relate to the domesticated content. Ideology aside, it is difficult to see how one person, the translator, can bridge two languages and cultures sufficiently well to achieve both linguistic and cultural translation except through a huge amount of research that is not always a practical option.

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Consciousness of the problem of negotiating between two sometimes very disparate cultures has led to the practice of translators working in tandem or collaboratively, both in poetry (Shackle, 2005:32) and in theatre translation where the translator often works with the director and actors, or a playwright works with a literal gloss of the play to be translated (Bassnett, 2006:20). Sometimes in narrative texts, the hybrid writer does the translating for the reader. In *A Short History of Tractors in Ukranian* by Marina Lewycka (2005) the action, much of which takes place in Ukranian, is relayed ready translated in the author's narrative; in Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* the action takes place in Irish, German and English, but is narrated in English. In both these examples the linguistic translation process has already taken place; what remains is the expression of the source cultural context.

Cultural memory, like language, is a cognitive function that depends on shared assumptions and collective agreement on how to evaluate and present cultural currency. Since Maurice Halbwachs (see Halbwachs, 1992) developed the idea of collective memory in the early twentieth century and Jan Assman (see Assman, 1995) defined the concept of collective cultural memory in the late eighties, the ethnographic influence of such theories has been much discussed. Migration, colonisation or displacement has lead communities to focus on shared memory in order to retain group identity in a foreign cultural context. The same communities have been drawn to challenge the conventions of both the historical memory and the literary canon of the dominant culture in order to redefine and establish their own identity.

New material from immigrant or post-colonial communities, the re-evaluation of previously underrated literary output – early modern women's writing for example - or the retranslation, the rewriting of pieces from the list of commonly accepted

classics all contribute to the constant state of flux of the established literary system. Historical systems periodically undergo a similar re-evaluation when agreed perceptions of events are contested by such titles as *Rethinking the Henrician Era* (Herman, 1994) *A New History of the Cold War*, (Lukacs, 1966) or by revisionists like J.J.Scarisbrick or Eamon Duffy. More recently there has been publicity surrounding the court case in Austria concerning David Irving's premise that Hitler did not instigate the systematic extermination of Jews in Europe. On a more individual level there have been a number of memoirs challenging the collective memory of the society they record – Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* for example. Challenges to the collective perception of canon together with translations of foreign canonical works enrich the existing literary system and keep it vibrant and creative (see Even-Zohar, 1978).

The shared working memory and cultural competence of the translator/writer provides the target text; that of the receiver or receivers completes the communicative act in terms of decoding and the shared cultural memory provides the status and positioning of the text in the literary polysystem. There are many places in such a complex process where communication can falter, not least in the expectation of the receiver.

Walter Benjamin wrote "The Task of the Translator" as the introduction to his 1923 translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*. He opens with the proposal that in the realm of works of art, or what we might call classics, prioritising the receiver is not useful. He continues with the idea that the classics are not only translatable but their ability to be translated, their continued life through translation is one of the features indicative of their greatness. On a linguistic level translation is the process that identifies the elements of the "pure language" from which all languages originally

sprang and to which they will return (Steiner, 1973:67). On a creative level translatability demonstrates the universality, the humanity, of classic texts.

But Benjamin was writing long before the definition of translation was expanded by Roman Jakobson to include intra-lingual and inter-semiotic activity (Jakobson 1959: 113) and long before translation as a discipline was literally mapped by James Holmes (Holmes, 1971). Benjamin was writing the year before sound was added to silent films, 25 years before television came into ordinary homes, in other words before the advent of mass media and mass markets. He could not have imagined the possibilities that future translators would have at their disposal in terms of visual media, or even the possible audiences that would be available for film and TV representations of the classics. Through new media, the elite reading audience of the 1920s was expanded to include everyone with a TV or a DVD player in the 21st century.

Horkheimer and Adorno's depressing analysis in 1945 of the same culture industry enlightenment as "mass deception", a business run for profit suppressing spontaneity and creativity rather than a transfer of art to the masses, reacts against the inclusivity brought about by access to mass media (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972:121). Disappointingly, some, though not all, of their predictions have proved true and, as in many areas of life, there exists a variety of examples of formulaic productions made for profit on the mass market rather than created in pursuit of representations or translations of the classics for the enlightenment of the audience.

Increased leisure time, access to education, improving technology and the introduction of new markets has meant that more people than ever have access to classics of their own and other cultures. They have more opportunity than ever to participate in their own culture, but the classics to which they have access are rarely in

their "original" form. In fact, as Bassnett and Lefevre (1998) point out in the introduction to *Constructing Cultures*, "most, if not all people who participate in a given culture will never in their life be exposed to all the 'originals' upon which culture claims to be based." What they will be exposed to are the many rewritings and translations which serve as the "originals" of the cultural capital of their culture, including inter-semiotic rewritings on TV or video.

Inter-semiotic translation, Jacobson's third category of translation, translation from text to screen, from page to stage, from word to image, requires the creative vision to recode in a different sign system. Transfer of narrative from sixteenth century language and culture to twenty-first century language and culture requires the same kind of working memory and knowledge of the target culture as an inter-lingual synchronic translation. Translation between media requires creativity if any kind of recognisable functional equivalence is to be achieved. Often the translator's skopos demands consideration of the receiver. In spite of Benjamin's idealistic comments on works of art, today's market driven patronage compels audience consideration and hastens the demise of the author.

The development of translation as a creative art has been dogged by the expectation, even from linguistically aware people, that translation will produce a copy in the target language; that absolute equivalence exists; that there is a single optimum or "classic" translation for every source text. As early as 1992 André Lefevere proposed the idea of translation as a rewriting of the source text and over the last decade or so the notion of creativity in literary translation has slowly been gaining ground. Balacescu and Stefanink (2003) give *skopos* theory the credit for first allowing creativity in target texts in spite of the fact that *skopos* theory was a proposal meant for non-literary texts. It was Even-Zohar's development of Polysystems theory

regarding translated texts in literary systems that perhaps first shifted the emphasis from source to target text in a way that allowed for some creative accommodation to the target culture (Even-Zohar, 1978).

Peter Bush and Susan Bassnett's book *The Translator as Writer* further supports the notions of rewriting creatively through translation and of the translator as creative writer. The book "seeks to challenge the stock responses that seem to mould public critical and academic opinion of translators as betrayers rather than as creators who give new lives to literary works in other languages as Walter Benjamin asserted (Bush and Bassnett, 2006:2)." One of the contributors, Ros Schwarz, marvels at the stock assumption that "once a translation exists in print it's assumed that this is the official translation (ibid.18)." It becomes the measure by which other translations are assessed rather than one possible interpretation of the source.

Creativity in translation stems from the plurality of readings possible in a classic work. There is a similarity here in the reading or interpretation or perspective of events in terms of memory. The same event experienced by several people may be remembered in different ways according to the individual experience and involvement of the participants. The narratives differ according to the perspective of the individual. Once the translation or creative rewriting is complete, the reader takes over. The possible readings of a particular work are many and vary according to the social and political context into which they are translated and according to the *skopos* and audience for whom they are translated. Although Benjamin discounts the receiver, Roland Barthes (1997) in "Death of the Author" gives the reader the full responsibility for giving sense to the target text. But what if the audience has little appreciation of the source context and a fairly limited knowledge of the target

culture? What if the audience is large and disparate with varying levels of experience of the source text context?

These were the issues faced by Baz Luhrmann, director of the 1996 film version of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. His production on the screen was not to be a single unique performance within the conventions of the stage but a motion picture and video which had the capacity to be played and replayed, to be read and reread like text. In fact film has been related to text in the original sense of the Latin "textus" – "fabric". In the fabric of the film is reflected the possible readings and source contexts of the play.

Any version of one of Shakespeare's plays, so central to the English speaking literary polysystem, encounters criticism based on the criteria of authority and fidelity. Some commentators persist in the idea of looking back to or writing back to the original, of retaining or getting back to what they conceive as the spirit of Shakespeare, to what Shakespeare intended. As Elsie Walker says "Such criticism impedes a thorough appreciation and understanding of the diverse cultural and historical contexts in and mediums through which Shakespeare is understood (Walker, 2006:5)." Focus on what is lost in translation is seldom productive unless some attempt is made to assess what is gained. Interestingly, Luhrmann's film has been the subject of considerable discussion and analysis by critics struggling to reconcile the impact of the film's modernity to the conventional concept of faithfulness to Shakespeare. Michael Andereg refers to exactly the kind of reaction the film drew from traditionalists when he opens his discussion with: "At first glance, Baz Lurhmann's William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet could be mistaken for yet another (mis)appropriation of Shakespeare's play for purposes of parody or even burlesque, a hip (hop?) retelling

aimed at an irredeemably lowbrow audience of clueless teenagers living in an intellectually bankrupt culture (Anderegg, 2004: 72)."

Luhrmann's intention was to translate *Romeo and Juliet* from a linguistically challenging late sixteenth century (1594-5) English play into a story that could be "read" and understood by modern young American people. He left traces, markers of the context from which the play came and tapped into the collective American memory in order to place the narrative into the host polysystem. In Friedrich Schleiermacher's terms he brought the writer to the reader (Schleiermacher, 1813, 1997: 42) but at the same time prioritised the source by retaining the sixteenth century language – trimming it down into the two hours passage promised in the prologue – as well as those elements perceived as iconic such as the Pilgrim sonnet, the Queen Mab speech and the balcony scene.

William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet

In order to demonstrate Luhrmann's creative strategies of translation and the way in which he connected both with the source context with the target collective memory, let us consider some specific examples.

It is no longer the convention to write a prologue for a modern play or to employ a chorus to recite it, whereas in Shakespeare's time it was the norm. Prologues are useful in that they provide the audience with information and either set the scene, or in some cases outline the story. Quite often in medieval and renaissance times, the audience already knew what was going to happen; the interest was in how the story unfolded and the prologue set the scene and tone for the retelling. The prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* does exactly this: tells the story briefly in a few lines and promises to reveal how the events came about. It also happens to be a sonnet, a fourteen line

poem written according to strict poetic forms and conventions, introduced into English poetics by translations from the Italian by Renaissance poets and refined by Shakespeare and his contemporaries into a competitive art form. Sonnets, concise and information packed, are not such a popular form of poetic expression today as they were in Shakespeare's time, nevertheless Luhrmann considers the form important enough to retain although he makes concessions to an audience unused to listening to performed poetry. What he does not retain is the method of delivery. Bridging the time gap between the source text and target audience, Luhrmann exchanges the traditional prologue deliverer for the contemporary familiar sight of a television news reader who announces the sonnet, minus the final couplet, exactly like a news item, complete with graphics behind her providing the images to assist translation. As the words are unfamiliar and not in the modern idiom, they are repeated several times, both as a voice over, in a male voice this time, and in text on the screen. Three media, text, image and voice are used to recap and reinforce the information. The result is that the text remains a sonnet in Shakespeare's language, but target culture conventions and sign systems are used to facilitate the "reading" by the audience. Using a black woman reflects two important elements in twentieth century target culture values, namely the equality issue between black and white and male and female. The television is very small to begin with and increases in size as the news reader recites until it dominates the screen. In current media conventions action, or at least image variety, is paramount; there is no room for static tableau or dramatic intensity without movement or at the very least different camera positions. Once the words have been spoken by the news presenter, they are immediately repeated by a male voice over and printed on the screen in text, newspaper headlines and banners in a fast moving, exciting mix of snapshots of the setting, reflecting the sounds, images

and atmosphere of the target context. The use of repetition and recap is a technique not only reflecting the range and speed of communication devices available in modern times but also the way in which a play might be read: as text on a page, aloud in rehearsal mode or performed on stage.

Another example of the use of target culture conventions to "translate" is the introduction of characters as if they were in an American TV soap complete with photo and text explaining who they are. Domestication takes place in the form of normalised names: Juliet's father becomes Fulgentio Capulet instead of merely "Capulet" and his wife is introduced as Gloria Capulet rather than the anonymous "Capulet's wife". The introductory frames follow the familiar freeze technique to allow the name to have maximum effect and again the three media, image voice and text are employed and the relationship of the character included. Such explanations could be seen as concessions to an audience whose knowledge of the story may be minimal and whose ability to absorb details aurally is not so finely tuned as renaissance audiences of a less literate culture. Alternatively one might argue that Shakespeare's audience would have been more familiar with his sources than today's filmgoers who as a result need some coaching.

Another device employed in medieval and renaissance times and used by Luhrmann is the pun, the literary joke for the initiated. Shakespeare was a master of the pun in the dialogue he wrote for the comic characters in all his plays, but today the conceit of the pun, as of the sonnet, is not so popular, or at least not in the context of dialogue for a play. In his film, Luhrmann cut the fools present in Shakespeare's play of Romeo and Juliet, perhaps to preserve the integrity of the action or perhaps to avoid over complicating an already complex plot.

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In order to compensate for the loss of humour, he inserts humorous references of a similar type. Sometimes he makes very brief (a shot of only a few seconds) allusions to other plays by Shakespeare either by quoting lines from them or by inserting a visual reference. "Prospero's finest whiskey: the stuff that dreams are made of" proclaims one advertising hoarding; the ruined theatre (see Buchanan, 2005:   ) is next to a pool hall called "The Globe"; one beach hut has the sign "The Merchant of Verona Beach" over it.

More obviously the director constructs an elaborate pun not present in the source text but designed to focus on the blatant modernisation process. In the first scene of the play there is a fight between characters from the rival households. Benvolio acts as peacemaker and shouts "Put up your swords!" In the film version, the scene takes place on a gas station forecourt and the weapons are guns, but Benvolio's line remains the same and is delivered with a close up of the gun to reveal the brand name – Sword. As well as making a literary joke of the type common in the source context, Luhrmann addresses the concentration of humour in puns in the first scene of the play in the conversation between Gregory and Samson. He confronts the fact that he is translating by deliberately highlighting the source and acknowledges the presence in the audience of those who know the original well enough to appreciate the collusion.

One of the strongest references in the film to the target culture is the allusion to the cowboy tradition. The scene at the gas station refers visually and aurally to the whole Hollywood cowboy theme in terms of gang culture, territorial claims, young men with attitude, confrontation and the sudden threat of violence. Luhrmann defines a functional equivalent to the family feud culture that Shakespeare presented and a vehicle for expressing attitude, group loyalty and aggression. American gun culture stands in for renaissance fighting with swords.

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We have mentioned prologues and sonnets as being part of the sixteenth century source text literary context; androgyny was another fascination, especially among writers such as Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. In the poem *Hero and Leander* (1598) Marlowe explores the characteristics of male and female and often assigns them to the opposite sex, for example Hero is the girl, Leander the boy. In some of his sonnets, Shakespeare addresses his male patron in terms more suitable for a mistress. In sonnet XX he discusses the male and female attributes of what he calls the "Master/mistress of my passion" and plays on the ambiguity of the relationship. On a practical level, young men played the women's parts on stage, so that cross-dressing was a familiar part of the acting tradition. Luhrmann combines the American show girl tradition, the fascination of Shakespeare with androgyny and the cross dressing elements by having Mercutio appear at the Capulet masked ball dressed as a woman.

The scene is an overt reference to the extravagant Broadway musical show – the symmetry of the tableau-like arrangement of the participants, the use of the stairway for effect, the richness of the colours and the variety of the costumes, but livened up in the film by some swift and fast-changing camera angles. The use of domestic referents gives a familiar context to the action so that the audience can understand the setting and the action even if they find the language difficult. One could argue that the modern context presented by Luhrmann is the descendant of Shakespeare's performance environment complete with elements of the original production. Anyone looking for a carbon copy of the original will be disappointed, but anyone with access to the cultural memory of the target culture will find a context within which the source play can be accommodated.

Another theme explored by Luhrmann in the masked ball scene is the concept of the hero. By choosing Leonardo de Caprio, a young film star and heart throb of the time, as his Romeo and Clare Danes, a young well-known and much admired television star, as Juliet, Luhrmann had already signalled that he had something to say about target youth culture and fame. In the source text Juliet's suitor is called simply Paris and would have suggested to contemporary audiences the hero Paris of Greek legendary fame. Luhrmann gives Dave Paris an astronaut's costume for the Ball, converting him into a well-known if rather old-fashioned hero to the US public, possibly the functional equivalent to Paris. Romeo comes as a Knight in shining armour, an old-fashioned medieval English hero figure to the English Renaissance source context, contrasting in the target context with the relative modernity of his rival and indicating the romantic context of his love for Juliet. The juxtaposition of old fashioned and modern ideas of hero works particularly well with respect to the different characters of the two suitors.

Juliet, reflecting both the imagery Romeo uses to refer to her and the context of their first conversation about pilgrims, sin and prayer, appears as an angel at the party. The idea of the angel metaphor is kept in the viewers' consciousness by scenes of Juliet musing alone in her room surrounded by statues of angels, so that when Romeo says: "O speak again bright angel!" during the balcony scene, the connection is easily made. Luhrmann teaches the audience how to read the language by use of non linguistic signs.

The intense religious context of *Romeo and Juliet* is a difficult one to maintain in a modern target culture where ideas and practices differ widely from those of medieval Italy. The problem is that the religious context is not only central to the plot but permeates Shakespeare's language and the systems of the society portrayed. It was

perhaps the biggest challenge to the director of the modern version. He addressed it first of all by using a pastiche of images of Mexico City, home of a strongly Catholic culture, combined with shots of the famous statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro in the opening sequence. Thereafter the religious atmosphere is conveyed by employing symbols such as lighted candles, statues, religious pictures (as the large one of the Virgin in the masked ball scene behind Mercutio) and crucifixes (worn by the gang members and tattooed on Friar Lawrence's back). As a constant reminder of the religious context, in the title *Romeo and Juliet* the "and" is replaced with a carefully shaped cross and becomes Romeo+Juliet.

We could go on adding to the number of examples of how the director has achieved inter-semiotic translation in *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* by using the cultural capital of the target culture and the cultural memory of the audience. The idea of acculturation in drama translation is not a new technique and its transfer to film is a natural development. My point is that in literary translation of the classics for a modern audience, knowledge and use of the source and target cultural memory can really enhance both the creative field of the translator and the experience of the receiver. There are those who would object that this kind of domestication or appropriation reduces, demeans or betrays the source. In some cases where the market driven impetus for the translation is paramount and the production fulfils Horkheimer's worst predictions there is no denying that this is the case. On the other hand I would argue that we have to be careful to read film properly and to analyse the relationship of the source to the target performance. Let our film analysis be as thorough as our textual analysis and let us be prepared for functional or even creative equivalence. Romeo and Juliet has been the subject of multiple translations and retellings and we forget that Shakespeare's primary source was Arthur Brooke's poem

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of 1562 among other similar tales (see Prunster, 2000). Certainly in the case of Luhrmann's film of Romeo and Juliet, creative intra-lingual and inter-semiotic translation gives an afterlife in the form of new life and new audiences to Shakespeare in the way that Walter Benjamin asserted.

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