Adaptation as a Process of Interpretation: *Nowhere in Africa* – From Stefanie Zweig to Caroline Link

Taking the background of literary theory as my starting point, I shall attempt to show that adaptation for the screen can be approached and analyzed as the result of an act of reading. In this sense, adaptation is interpretation, in the sense of a creative transformation of the original that resembles the original closely. This also entails the destruction of the aura of the original. I shall illustrate this with Caroline Link’s adaptation of Stefanie Zweig’s novel *Nowhere in Africa*. As adaptation occurs in a media-driven society, it is also influenced by constraints that are alien to literary theory, namely those imposed by the media and the market economy.

1. Impetus. Literary Theory and Adaptation

Julia Kristeva and in the same order of idea Roland Barthes conceive the process of text production as the logical consequence and the result of an act of reading, in which the writer, who is at the same time a reader, inscribes foreign (past and/or contemporary) texts and discourses into his own text. Kristeva adopts Philippe Sollers’ standpoint\(^3\) when she writes: “Reading denotes an aggressive participation, an active appropriation of the other”. She therefore perceives writing as reading that has become “production, industry”.\(^4\) While

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\(^4\) My translation. Original: “‘lire’ dénote, donc, une participation agressive, une active appropriation de l’autre. ‘Écrire’ serait le ‘lire’ devenu production, industrie. L’écriture-lecture, l’écriture paragrammatique serait l’aspiration vers une agressivité et une participation totale”. Julia Kristeva: Pour une sémioïologie des paragrammes. Ibid., p. 120.
splicing different texts and discourses into his own, the writer refers to them and transforms them, creating an ambivalent texture, which resembles the original. In fact, Roland Barthes defines the text as a texture, comparing it with the web woven by a spider. In such a work, Barthes says, several texts, codes, signifiers etc. are woven together, crossing over in a new text.

Taking this background of literary theory as starting point, my purpose is to analyze the way the Munich director and scriptwriter Caroline Link has adapted Stefanie Zweig’s novel *Nowhere in Africa* for the screen. My primary concern is to investigate in what respects adaptation can be regarded as a process of interpretation; in other words, as a process which can be considered to be the result of Link’s reading of Zweig’s novel. Adaptation has to be seen as a process of interpretation and of transformation. This corresponds to Alfred Estermann’s understanding of adaptation as a process during which the original is taken apart and transformed. Some aspects and figures are eliminated or reinterpreted and others are added to the plot. This must be done with respect to what Estermann calls “Umstand des Filmens”, i.e. with respects to the demands and possibilities of the film medium. Fidelity to the original can only be of secondary importance. The process of adaptation, as presented by Estermann, can therefore be grasped as the result of an act of reading, during which the original is interpreted and transformed. As far as the act of reading corresponds with a process of writing, as Kristeva says, similarly, a correspondence between adaptation and an act of reading should be legitimate.

It is important to stress the fact that Caroline Link was commissioned to write the screenplay for her film by MTM (Medien & Television, München). This implies that the process of adaptation necessarily occurs within two different frameworks: As has been stressed above, adaptation can to be regarded as the result of an act of reading, and can therefore be analyzed with categories derived from literary theory, but as this process occurs in a media-driven society, it is also subject to other factors that are alien to literary theory, namely the demands of the media and the market economy. Consequently, an exploration of the aesthetic aspects of adaptation can only be carried out if those two conditions are taken into consideration.

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