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TRANSCULTURAL FILM ADAPTATIONS AS CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

ДИАЛОГ КУЛЬТУР В ТРАНСКУЛЬТУРНЫХ ЭКРАНИЗАЦИЯХ

В статье анализируется экранизация романа *Доктор Живаго* Бориса Пастернака. В 1965 году британский режиссер Дэвид Лин экранизировал книгу Пастернака, удостоенную Нобелевской премии. Лин сотрудничал с одной из крупнейших американских киностудий Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. В статье рассматривается изменения, которые претерпевает текст, адаптируемый под американскую аудиторию. Экранизация *Доктора Живаго* Лина анализируется как диалог разных культур, предполагающий «голливудизацию» романа Пастернака. Автор подчеркивает интертекстуальный и межкультурный диалог романа Бориса Пастернака *Доктор Живаго* и одноименной экранизации Дэвида Лина 1965 года. Экранизация значительно расширяет контекст романа, устанавливая диалог с другими текстами культуры, например, с фильмами эпохи «холодной войны», их кинематографическими приемами и идеологией. «Голливудизация» романа Пастернака позволила избежать шаблонной репрезентации России в американском кино как вражеского государства и представить страну как экзотическую локацию, а не идеологического и военного врага.

Ключевые слова: Борис Пастернак, Дэвид Лин, *Доктор Живаго*, транскультурная экранизация, межкультурный диалог

This article explores a transcultural film adaptation, offering new avenues for discussing cross-cultural dialog. The article analyzes the transcultural adaptation of *Doctor Zhivago*, written by Boris Pasternak. The book was adapted in 1965 by British director David Lean, who cooperated with one of the largest American film studios, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. This work considers the changing

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meaning of the text, which enters a new national culture, and explores how Pasternak's novel was changed to fit the new audience. Lean's adaptation of *Doctor Zhivago* is analyzed as a dialogue of different cultures, which involve the "Hollywoodization" of Russian literature. The author emphasizes the intertextual and cultural dialogism of Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* and David Lean's 1965 film adaptation. The film adaptation inserts the novel into much broader dialogic relations, for example, with movies of a specific era, their cinematic technics, and ideologies.

Keywords: Boris Pasternak, David Lean, *Doctor Zhivago*, transcultural adaptation, cross-cultural dialogue

Russian literature has been widely adapted for the screen in the country of its origin and far beyond Russia. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian novels established by such prolific authors as Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Turgenev, Fedor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pasternak, and others, contributed to the international recognition and appreciation of Russian literature in Western countries and influenced world culture in many spheres, such as cinema, theatre, and philosophy. Many directors adapted Russian literature for the screen, including Akira Kurosawa, Robert Bresson, Bernardo Bertolucci, and other prominent artists. Russian literature was highly appealing to adapters because it raises a broad range of questions, the so-called "accursed questions": "the meaning of life, the existence or non-existence of God, and the potential impact of the revolutionary transformation of society"[1]. These questions are highly relevant when it comes to other cultures and can be viewed in other social contexts and periods.

By entering a new national culture, adaptations of Russian literature have always radically changed their meaning and added a plurality of voices. Transcultural adaptations expand the text's borders and interplay with cultural and ideological constructs. This article seeks to explore the semantic shifts occurring as a work is adapted and changed for a different audience and period, as well as different social and historical contexts. The material chosen is David Lean's film adaptation of Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago*. As Alexander Burry notes, "when a Russian literary text, with all of its embedded cultural meanings, is transported to another culture or time or both, these meanings are foreign and must be redefined to correspond with the new spatial and temporal territories"[2].

This article explores how the text was changed to fit the new audience, which did not go to the theatre to see the process of writing poetry and for reflections on Russian history as much as to see an epic romance about a man living in a turbulent time and trapped in a love triangle. Robert Bolt, who wrote the screenplay for

[1] A. Burry, *Introduction: "Filming Russian Classics – Challenges and Opportunities"*, [in:] *Boarder Crossing. Russian Literature Into Film,* ed. Alexander Burry and Frederick H. White, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP 2016, p. 1.

[2] Ibid., p. 7.

Lean's adaptation, complained about the difficulty of writing a script based on the novel written by a lyrical poet who tried to evoke the inner life of his protagonist[3]. For the director himself, adaptation was, above all, a love story. He spoke openly about favouring the love story over the political and historical conflicts in the film for the sake of attracting the mass audience. Lean explained that the tragic love story would undoubtedly attract larger numbers of filmgoers. Therefore, he tried to make political issues in the film as easy as possible[4]. MGM's film adaptation of *Doctor Zhivago* had to explain to the new audience the historical background and make almost 50 years of historical events covered in the novel fit into a reasonable running time. The various stereotypes in the film serve well to condense the explanation. The director effectively uses landscapes (snow-covered landscapes in the Urals and Moscow), music (the balalaika), costumes (fur coats and hats as the most obvious clothing for Russians) to represent the foreign places and people.

Transcultural film adaptations serve not only to convey the culture of the adapted text, but also to enhance the target audience's cultural background and sign system. Lean's 1965 *Doctor Zhivago* shows a particular understanding of war, Revolution, freedom, love, and other concepts present in the novel. At the same time, a particular filmmaker reflects his or her opinion on these concepts. According to Ian Christie, MGM, led by Robeert O'Brien, gave Lean "total freedom on the production and the choice of screenwriter and crew"[5]. Thus, it is hard to say whose view on those concepts the film expresses – the director's, MGM's (pop culture's), American, or British. Things complicate even more because the target audience was predominantly American, the director and screenwriter, and the majority of the actors were British.

Additionally, both the director and the screenwriter were involved in the political life of the era. For example, the screenwriter Robert Bolt belonged to the British Communist Party, which could have affected the representation of the Russian Revolution in the film. It is worth noting that since Lean's 1965 production was not British, the director was seen as a "Hollywood" filmmaker. This meant that the film was predominantly designed for the American audience. In this way, the film *Doctor Zhivago* can be analyzed as a dialog of different cultures and sign systems, which interact with one another in the process of adaptation.

"The conceptual grid" of the Cold War

Susan Bassnett underlines that the process of translation and adaptation can be highly manipulative. It depends on the choice of text, censorship, strategies of

[3] I. Christie, *Doctor Zhivago*, British Film Institute, London: *British Film Institute* 2015, p. 18.
[4] Ibid., p. 17.
[5] Ibid., p. 14.

translation, and meanings imposed in the target system[6]. Translation can emphasize stereotypes and simplify the source text to make it more comprehensible for foreign readers or viewers. Anuradha Dingwaney claims that when a translator tries to make another culture and the image of the Other more comprehensible, the process of translation entails different degrees of violence. The target culture takes over the power of representation and creates images that represent other countries and nations. As Mahasweta Sengupta states, the represented culture is trapped in the stereotypical images nurtured through the process of translation[7]. However, according to the post-colonial approach to translation, a translator (or an adapter) can be seen as a liberator who establishes a dialog between the source text and the target language readership or viewers[8].

Analyzing the adaptation of the novel *Doctor Zhivago*, we can claim that, on the one hand, it confirms Dingwaney and Sengupta's assumption and involves manipulation evident in the representation of the country and people. Lean's adaptation emphasizes stereotypes about Russians and Russian culture based on the British and American imagination of the country. In the movie, images and landscapes are overgeneralized and loaded with additional meaning. On the other hand, using Bassnett's terms, Lean's adaptation can be considered as an act of liberation: it allowed the novel forbidden in the USSR to find an audience. André Lefevere defines an ideological focus as a "conceptual grid" that "consists of opinions and attitudes deemed acceptable in a certain society in a certain time"[9]. Such a "grid" is prominent in Lean's adaptation of Pasternak's novel. The 1960s are regarded as a unique period in American and world history. It was a time of great dramas and upheaval in American society:

> Most ominously, the Cold War continued to heat up. American and Soviet tanks faced each other in August 1961 as construction began on the Berlin Wall […]. People were still buying and building fallout shelters in 1960, and "duck and cover" drills continued to be practiced in the nation's public schools. […] And during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, the world waited for almost a week at the brink of nuclear war […]. Americans became increasingly polarized by the Vietnam War, with opposition growing from a small faction early in the decade to become the most significant antiwar movement in American history[10].

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[6] S. Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, London–New York: Routledge 1991, p. 123.

[7] Ibid, p. 4.

[8] Ibid, p. 6.

[9] A. Lefevere, *Translation Practice(s) and the Circulation of Cultural Capital: Some Aeneids in English*, [in:] *Constructing Cultures: Essays On Literary Translation Topics in Translation*, ed. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, Toronto–Sydney–Johannesburg: Multilingual Matters 1998, p. 48.

[10] B. K. Grant, *Introduction. Movies and the 1960s*, [in:] *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP 2008, p. 2.

Lean's adaptation deals not only with transferring the text onto the screen but also with the representation of the history of a hostile state, namely the communist USSR. After World War II, Russia/the USSR played a special role in the American consciousness as the ideological and military enemy. Throughout the twentieth century, Russia was the primary "Other" in American foreign policy and on American screens. Hollywood movies were the main source of information about Russia and Russians available to the masses. Harlow Robinson notes that the image of the country that emerged from Hollywood films was "artificial, inaccurate, and manipulative"[11]. However, for the great majority of Americans, this image "presented in mainstream Hollywood films acquired enormous power and authority, particularly in the absence of consistently reliable alternative information on a country because of historical and political events"[12]. Recalling his first viewing of Lean's adaptation of *Doctor Zhivago*, Robinson underlines the clash between the image of Russia he acquired at school and his impression of the country presented on the screen:

> This Russia affected me emotionally in a way I had never been affected before, erasing whatever vague fear I had absorbed from school textbooks or daily newspaper and television news stories about the evil Commies in Moscow and their dangerous comrades in nearby Cuba who together were building missiles to attack us. We talked in school about building fallout shelters. Those stories seemed abstract and remote, but Dr. Zhivago's was immediate and full of very recognizable things. […] that removed all barriers of geography, history and ideology. How awful could Russia be if such people as Julie Christie and Omar Sharif lived there?[13]

This view is very naïve, yet it indicates the peculiarity of representation of Russia in the film adaptation of Pasternak's novel. Above all, the film featured a passionate romance, which dominated over the hostile attitude to the enemy state and effectively, to a degree at least, attenuated the political contexts of the film. Generally, the film does not represent an us-and-them mentality; it shows that Russians (aristocracy and Communists) could be good and evil. The protagonist does not fall into any ideological stereotypes; ideological tension is absent in the movie. Moreover, as Marina Korneeva writes,

> *Zhivago* humanized Russia and Russians for the American audience in a way that no previous Hollywood film had done. […] It created the impression that Russians – even if they had

[11] H. Robinson, *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood's Russians: Biography of an Image*, Boston-Hanover: UP of New England 2007, p. 3.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid, pp. 2–3.

> much worse luck with governments and the weather – were in the end not so terribly different from Americans[14].

Just like in the USA, there was poetry, beautiful nature, great love, family relationships, and music. Maurice Jarre's "Lara's Theme," composed for the film's soundtrack, became very popular and won an Academy Award for Best Original Score in 1966. "Lara's Theme" has been covered and adapted by various artists, becoming an iconic piece of cinematic music. Additionally, Sharif's Zhivago was highly appealing to the audience. The actor created a romantic image, adding sensuality to the protagonist. In her article "Omar Sharif: A European Middle Eastern Star," Samar Abdel-Rahman highlights the role of Sharif's appearance in creating an appealing image of the character:

> The film often dwells on Sharif's face as he stares into the distance with his frequently tearful eyes, allowing us the gratification of gazing at his strikingly handsome face. Occasionally, the framing directs the audience to focus on his large amber eyes, adding a depth of sensuality to Zhivago[15].

This focus on the actor's physical attractiveness, deep voice, and large amber eyes constructs an image of the protagonist as a "full-blown romantic"[16]. The backdrop of the snowy landscape intensifies the actor's exotic appearance: slightly tanned skin, sharp nose, and long eyelashes. In the film, due to Lean's intention to turn Pasternak's novel into a romance, Zhivago was constructed as predominantly "a romantic persona driven by passion"[17]. Sharif's performance made him popular among female fans, who "admired the exotic heartthrob"[18]. Thus, during the heat of the Cold War, Lean created one of the most iconic film romances in a Russian setting instead of a conventional representation of Russia as the enemy state. Significantly, the protagonist's description is almost absent in Pasternak's novel. This allows us to state that Zhivago's attractiveness is purely Lean's invention.

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[14] M. Korneeva, *Twentieth Century Russian Literature as Adapted by Foreign Film-Makers*, [in:] *Язык и культура. Сборник статей XXXII Международной научной конференции*, ed. Е. Гураль, Томск: Национальный исследовательский Томский государственный университет 2022, p. 50.

[15] S. Abdel-Rahman, *Omar Sharif: A European Middle Eastern Star*, [in:] *The Routledge Companion to European Cinema*, ed. Gábor Gergely, Susan Hayward, London–New York: Routledge 2022, p. 185.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

Love, the best-selling product

For Pasternak, central in *Doctor Zhivago* were the issues of Yuri as a poet, the faith of an artist in turbulent times, and other transcendental themes that posed a problem for a filmmaker and screenwriter. Lean reduced the novel to a tragic love story in his film adaptation. In one of the interviews, he said: "We're hoping that the audience will now believe that this was a kind of *Tristan and Iseult* situation, a great, grand passion"[19]. The director explained his reduction of the novel to a love story: "We can't expect the mass audience to follow the refinement of conflict in the political area. It must be stated as simply as possible […] while the audience will understand every nuance of the love story"[20]. This strategy agrees with the main aim of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's production: to make the movie appealing to a broad audience that would turn the investment into a successful blockbuster. For that reason, O'Brien, the president of MGM during the 1960s, wanted Lean, whose epic *Lawrence of Arabia* had spectacular success, to direct the expensive production.

The Yuri-Lara story of tragic love can be considered the deep narrative structure of the novel that is easily recognized by international filmgoers. As Cristina Della Coletta points out, the deep structures of narrative "condense shared aspects of human experience and understanding" (10). These structures can be embedded in culturally and historically specific frameworks and reappear in texts of culture. Della Coletta suggests that mythical patterns, transhistorical narrative codes, and psychological structures belong to deep narrative structures. A story of tragic love is one of them.

Indeed, the Zhivago-Lara storyline perfectly fits the concept of romantic love and does indeed resemble the "Tristan and Iseult situation". The myth and cult of romantic love started to form in the Middle Ages. Denis de Rougemont, in his book *Love in the Western World,* states that *amour* and *mort* are the essences of a romance:

> Love and death, a fatal love – in these phrases is summed up, if not the whole of poetry, at least whatever is popular, whatever is universally moving in European literature, alike as regards the oldest legends and the sweetest songs. Happy love has no history. Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, frowned upon and doomed by life itself. What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple; not the satisfaction of love, but its passion. And passion means suffering. There we have the fundamental fact[21].

[19] I. Christie, *Doctor Zhivago*…, p. 16.

[20] Ibid, p. 17.

[21] D. Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, transl. by Montgomery Belgion, Princeton: Princeton UP 1983, p. 15.

According to de Rougemont, an integral part of romantic love is suffering, which is a consequence of the conflict between *eros* (natural attraction) and *agape* (Christian sacrifice). Romantic love is always forbidden (contrary to existing rules), and the obstacles that get in the way of lovers are insurmountable. The prototypes and models of the European myth of romantic love that finally took shape in the 19th century were the stories of Tristan and Isolde, Petrarch and Laura, Abelard and Heloise, Hamlet and Ophelia, and Romeo and Juliet.

There are apparent similarities between the Yuri-Lara storyline in Pasternak's novel (especially in the film adaptation) and the elements of romance listed by culturologist Pawel Boski in his book *Kulturowe ramy zachowań społecznych*. Boski claims that a sudden outburst of feeling is one of the main elements of a romantic love story. In the novel, Yuri meets Lara for the first time in the hospital in Meluzeevo during World War I. At the end of their work in the hospital, Zhivago feels compassion for Lara and confesses his feelings. In the film adaptation, the idea of Yuri and Lara as star-crossed lovers is emphasized by a scene absent in the novel, when Zhivago and Lara coincidently meet on the tram, not yet knowing each other: "The tram's pick-up slides hissing along the wire. A crackle and sparks as it passes a joint"[22]. Undoubtedly, the sparks and joints of the tram's pick-ups stand for the characters' sudden and passionate love.

According to Boski, the second mandatory element of a romance is the impossibility of "absolute unity" because of the conflict between *eros* and social norms. As Lean remarked in one of the interviews, it was challenging to explain to the audience why the protagonist falls in love with Lara if he has such a good wife, Tonya: "it's a story about a very, very good man who has two women in his life and he loves both of them. Now this obviously can happen in real life, but in the movies, it doesn't. […] They are both marvelous women, and I don't know how film audience will take it"[23]. The lovers are married and devoted to their families. For that reason, they cannot be together. As a third element, Bosky underlines the obstacles that keep the lovers from a reunion and the instability of their relationships. Obviously, in the novel and its film adaptations, the Revolution, the war, and the chaos of the early stage of Soviet rule prevent the lovers' being together; historical circumstances entrap them. Erica Todd confirms that temporal settings are crucial for the romantic drama: "War remained the central theme, as an intrusion into the protagonist's courtship, matching the turbulent backdrops"[24].

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[22] R. Bolt, *Doctor Zhivago*. Shooting Script from the Screenplay, 1964, p. 32.

[23] D. Smith-Rowsey, *Blockbuster Performances. How Actors Contribute to Cinema's Biggest Hits*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, p. 25.

[24] E. Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema. Romance and Film Genre*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, p. 61.

Boski also mentions the appeal of nature as one of the romantic story elements. In Pasternak's novel and Lean's film, Lara and Yuri find temporary seclusion in the country house in Varykino. Finally, as mentioned, the romance ends with the death of one or both lovers. In the novel and the movie, Lara and Yuri never reunite after their short exile in Varykino. In the novel, Lara appears at Zhivago's funeral and is soon imprisoned by the secret police. In the film adaptation, Yuri sees Lara from the tram's window in Moscow a few years later after their parting, which forms the frame structure of the love story: their first and last meetings occur on the tram – the fatal heart attack and the protagonist's sudden death end the love story. Soon after, the viewers learn from the narrator's voice-over that Lara was taken to a labor camp, where she disappeared and most likely died.

Thus, Lean strengthens and emphasizes the structure of the romantic story embedded in Pasternak's novel, turning the book into a romance. Nowadays, Lean's adaptation of *Doctor Zhivago* is considered a classic of Hollywood epic romance together with *Gone with the Wind* (1939), directed by Victor Fleming. The director James Cameron puts on a par these two films while explaining his vision of another great Hollywood romance *Titanic* (1997): "I think of it as an epic romance. I told the studio, this is going to be a three hours *movie*. The films I'm trying to emulate are *Gone with the Wind* and *Doctor Zhivago*"[25]. Additionally, the soundtrack "Lara's Theme", just like the song "My Heart Will Go On" from *Titanic*, "has remained a staple of international popular music"[26]. Lean even complained about the popularity of the music from the film, which cheapened the reputation of their production, reducing it to a banal romantic movie[27]. Lean's detractor Bosley Crowther also compared the adaptation with *Gone with the Wind* but in an ironic manner, entitled his review *Gone with the Purga*.

In film criticism, Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* is frequently mentioned as the most emblematic Hollywood romance, for example, in Daniel Smith-Rowsey's *Blockbuster Performances* or Todd's *Passionate Love and Popular Cinema*. In 2002, *Doctor Zhivago* took an honorable seventh place (out of 100) in the American Film Institute's ranking of greatest love stories in American cinema. In 2007, Lean's adaptation was released on DVD as a part of a four-disc set of Warner's *Essential Classics* series, which contains, as the description says, "three truly classic films": *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, *Doctor Zhivago*. This is proof that the movie *Doctor Zhivago* by a British director and based on a Russian novel has truly entered the American popular consciousness.

[25] N. Griffin, "James Cameron is the Scariest Man in Hollywood", *Esquire* 1997, December, p. 100.
[26] I. Christie, *Doctor Zhivago*…, p. 87.
[27] Ibid.

Conclusion

As the article shows, the semantic shift occurs while adapting and changing cultural and historical contexts. Upon entering American cinematic culture, the original semantic grounds of the Russian novel changed on the way into the script. The director radically simplified or omitted philosophical and political issues to reduce the plot to a romance. The simplification aimed to attract a broader audience. This agrees with Bassnett's notion that the adaptation process can be manipulative and may simplify the source text to make it more comprehensible for a foreign audience. At the same time, as Bassnett claims, an adapter can be seen as a liberator who establishes the dialog between the source text and the new audience. Lean's adaptation allowed Pasternak's novel, forbidden in the country where it was written, to find an audience abroad. Instead of the conventional representation of Russia in American cinema in the 1960s, Lean created one of the most iconic Hollywood romances. The Yuri-Lara love story dominating the plot in the film can be considered a deep narrative structure, which condenses the shared aspects of human experience and can be easily recognized even when embedded in a specific cultural and historical framework.

Additionally, the simplification of the source text made it possible to avoid the representation of Russia as the enemy state during the Cold War and present the country as an exotic location rather than an ideological and military enemy. As Erica Todd claims, exotic locales enrich the romance genre and make it more appealing to the audience. Exciting new locations were very popular in American cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. Hollywood filmmakers used Asian landscapes as settings (Hong Kong in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*) and European historical architecture (Italy in *Summertime* and *September Affair*) as the sites of romantic courtship. In Lean's *Doctor Zhivago*, exotic places and the turbulent time of the Revolution are serve as the backdrop of a personal love story. As Todd claims, "the grandiose nature of these locations also helped to enhance the fatalistic elements and otherworldly connection to passionate love"[28].

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[28] E. Todd, *Passionate Love*…, p. 56.

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