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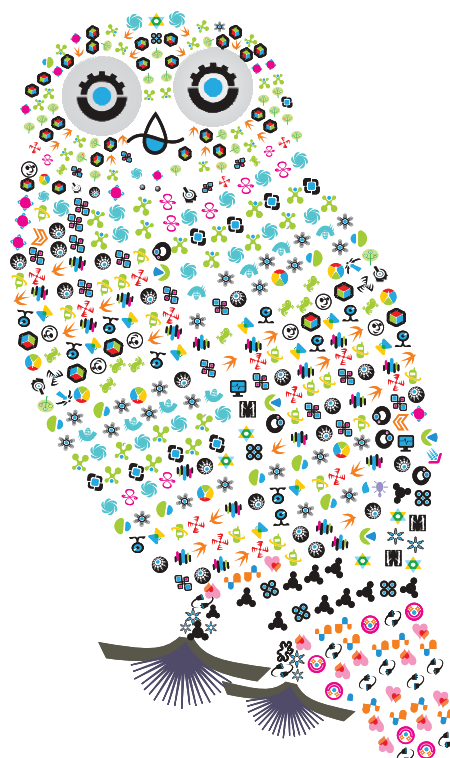**Internationale Vereinigung für Semiotik**

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COMICS IN MOTION: THE INTERSEMIOTIC TRANSLATION OF COMICS INTO FILM

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating the ways in which cinema "repeats" and transposes – in a word *translates*, in an inter-semiotic sense – comics. My analysis will be grounded on an original theoretical approach, combining Descriptive Translation Studies, Glossematics and Generative Semiotics. On the one hand – drawing on Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory and Gideon Toury's descriptive translation theory –, I will consider the translation of comics into film in terms of "acceptability" to the (cinematic) target system, rather than in terms of adequacy or "fidelity" to the (comics) source text. On the other – drawing on Louis Hjelmslev linguistic theory and on Algirdas J. Greimas semiotic theory – I will identify different "levels" of translation, distinguishing among three linguistic planes (expression, content and text).

Following these theoretical premises, my paper will be articulated in two parts. First of all, I will try to identify the "norms" and constraints (imposed by the target system) that regulate the acceptability of the cinematic translation of comics. In particular, I will make a distinction among technological/linguistic, economical, and institutional constraints, focusing in particular on the first ones. Through a series of examples, I will thus investigate which elements of comics can be translated into film, and how. I will identify three different translation processes – duplication, transformation, obliteration –, depending on whether elements of comics succeed in "passing through" the above-mentioned cinematic constraints or are instead deeply transformed, or even "rejected", by the target system. In the second part of this paper, then, I will outline a taxonomy of the main "translative relations" between videogame and cinema, identifying four different intersemiotic levels: the intertextual, the interexpressive, the interdiscoursive, and the intersystemic. I will focus on the main linguistic forms pertaining to each level (quotation, allusion, adaptation), with examples taken from contemporary international film production.

1. Introduction

This paper presents some theoretical and analytical tools for the study of "intersemiotic relations," that is the relations established between two or more texts belonging to different semiotic and medial systems. In particular, it focuses on the relations established between film texts and comics texts – or more precisely, on the relations developed by film texts *towards* comics texts in the digital era. My argument considers these relations as the result or, better, the "logical consequence" of a translation; it is, more precisely, an "intersemiotic translation" that involves texts semiotically different from each other. At the end of the Fifties, the category of intersemiotic translation was introduced by Roman Jakobson, who defined it as "an interpretation of a verbal sign by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (1959: 233). Later discussions in this field brought the category – as Gianfranco Marrone (1998: 125) writes – to be "reinterpreted from a rigorously semiotic point of view," depriving verbal signs of any "function of general interpretant," and considering instead every sign system at the same "level," "regardless of the matter of expression they employ." Thus, today the category of intersemiotic translation is generally used (Dusi 2003) to describe the re-production of a source-text (or part of it) belonging to a source-system (here, the comics system) in a target-text (or part of it), which belongs to a target-system (here, the cinematic system).

Before delving deeper into the matter, however, there is the need to point out two further remarks about how to understand here the concept of translation (both intersemiotic and intrasemiotic). First of all, I consider the translation process in a broad Lotmanian sense (Lotman and Uspenskij [1970] 1975; Lotman 1985), that is as a general cultural-semiotic process which underlies the transfer and the re-production of *every* semiotic unit (whatever form they have and whatever size they have) from a source-text to a target-text. Within this framework, every intertextual relation (both intersemiotic and intrasemiotic) is thus founded on a previous translation, that is on the transfer of some elements from a text to another text – the elements that therefore constitute the relation itself. In addition to Jurij M. Lotman, the main references here are Anton Popovič's ([1975] 2006) category of "intertextual invariant" and Peeter Torop's ([1995] 2010) discussion of "total translation."

Secondly, I consider translations as "facts" (Gideon Toury's (1995 [2012]: 23) of the target semiotic, medial and cultural system. In this perspective, translations (both intersemiotic and intrasemiotic) always originate *within* the target-system. For this reason, I believe translations can be more profitably studied in a target-oriented perspective, which means taking into account the norms and constraints employed by the target-system to regulate the transfer process. In fact, these norms and constraints have the purpose to conform the source-text to the structure of the target-system or, in other words, to adapt the source-text to the internal requirements of the target-system. My references here are, among others, Itamar Even-Zohar's (1990) Polysystem Theory and Gideon Toury's (2012) Descriptive Translation Theory.

2. The translation process

Moving from these premises, I will now draw a general overview of the intersemiotic translation process, which is outlined in the following scheme (table 1). According to it, the intersemiotic translation process is based (1) on the involvement of at least two media, a source-medium (M1) and a target-medium (M2); (2) on the transfer of semiotic units from a source-text, produced inside the source-medium, to a target-text, re-produced inside the target-medium. Drawing on Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory (1990), I conceive the two media as polysystems (PS1 and PS2), each composed of different sub-systems (S) both of semiotic and non-semiotic nature (i.e. socio-economic, institutional, technological etc.). Every sub-system contributes to the production of a text (or parts of it) inside the source-system, and to the re-production of this text (or parts of it) inside the target-system.
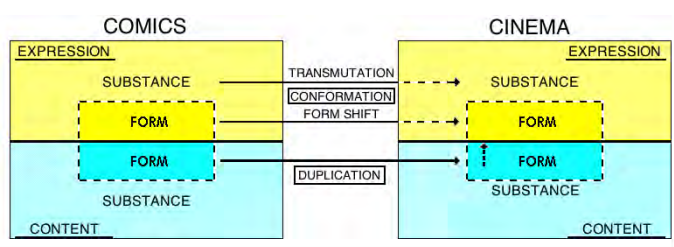
Table 1: The translation process: A general outline.

Due to issues of space here, it is not possible to describe the translation process in detail. I will thus focus only on the transfer mechanism. As it is possible to see from the scheme, I account for at least three different transfer typologies, depending on the capacity of the source-text elements to pass through the border of the target-polysystem. It is possible to identify (1) a "duplication" process (TP1) when some elements pass through the border of the target-polysystem without any changes; (2) a "conformation" process (TP2) when some elements undergo a transformation in order to be accepted by the target-polysystem; (3) and an "expunction" process (TP3) when some elements are rejected by the target-polysystem due to their incompatibility. The "border" (B) of the target-polysystem plays a central role in this process. Paraphrasing Lotman (1985: 59), the border represents the "sum" of the socio-semiotic constraints that regulate the translation. More precisely, these constraints regulate how (and how much of) the source-text can be translated into the target-polysystem.

But how many constraints are there? And what is their nature? Drawing again on Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (1990: 31), I identify at least three macro-typologies of constraints: economic constraints, institutional constraints, and semiotic constraints. For reasons of space, I cannot examine these issues in depth here. Thus, I will only give an example that highlights the role of economic and institutional constraints – which include, among other things, business models and censorship laws – and then I will analyse the semiotic constraints.

I will compare the movie *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) to the comic book mini-series *Torment* (written and pencilled by Todd McFarlane in 1990), one of the primary source-texts of the movie. It is easy to notice that gore, one of the distinctive figurative elements of the comic book, has been almost completely expunged from the film adaptation. It has probably occurred because the translation of the comics into film has been regulated by economic and institutional constraints. The movie was in fact meant to enter a specific market sector, that of the early teen-agers, who purportedly have been (and still are) the main readers of the comic book franchise. So, first of all, there was an economic constraint at play. To achieve this aim, the movie necessarily had to be rated PG-13 (i.e. unsuitable for children under thirteen), according to the US film industry rating system, which is very strict regarding gore. If the movie had been rated NC-17 (which is the next category in the rating system), no one under Seventeen would be admitted to the screenings, causing the movie to lose a big part of its potential audience. By

removing any gore element, instead, the producers have maintained the possibility to address the movie's potential "natural" audience. Therefore, the PG-13 rating represents an institutional constraint, related to the US film industry and its self-censorship code, which has regulated the cinematic translation of the comic book in concurrence with an economic constraint, related to a specific commercial requirement.

The semiotic constraints concern the semiotic differences of the languages involved in the translation process and their potential "translatability." Focusing on the relationship between cinema and comics, the following scheme can be outlined (table 2):
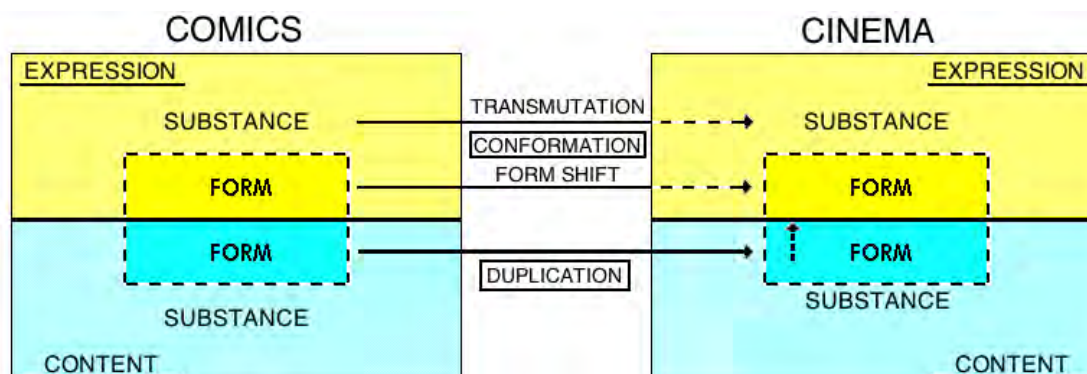
Table 2: From comics to cinema: Semiotic constraints and translatability.

On the content plane, provided there are not any institutional and economical constraints involved, the content form and substance of the comics text (i.e. its narrative and discursive structure) can be potentially subjected to a total duplication in the film's content form and substance, by being then re-semioticized through the expressive substances of the target-medium. On the expression plane, there is a "conformation" process that involves two main processes: the transmutation of the comics expression substances and forms – for example, from hand-drawn still pictures to live-action moving pictures – and the shift of part of the comics expression form from the original comics substances to the cinematic substances – for example, a dialogue between two characters shifts from the substance "graphic form of written words" to the substance "phonetic sound of [spoken words]," as Christian Metz would say ([1971] 1974: 16).

However, the translation process should not be conceived as an overall "passive" and conservative process; on the contrary, sometimes a translation can "force" the border (and even move it), allowing some non-conforming or less-conforming figures to pass through it. For instance, on the expression plane this "forcing" can cause what Metz calls "semiotic interferences" (1974: 228), which occur when the target-text features an expressive unit that pertains to the source-semiotic system. It is possible to find an example of semiotic interferences in *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010) – the film adaptation of the comic book series by the same name (2004–2010), created by Bryan Lee O'Malley – where the movie features some comics-like onomatopoeia (figure 1).

Fig. 1: Semiotic interferences in *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*.

3. A taxonomy of intersemiotic relations

I will now proceed to deepen the analysis of the translation transfer and of the intersemiotic relations it determines. Here, the framework of reference is Structural and Generative Semiotics (Greimas and Courtés [1979] 1993) and Louis Hjelmslev's glossematics (Hjelmslev [1943] 1969). For Hjelmslev a sign (and a text, more generally) is "an entity generated by the connection between an expression [plane] and a content [plane]" (1969: 47). For this connection the author uses the term "sign function" (1969: 47). Moreover, Hjelmslev maintains that "both the expression plane and the content plane are further stratified into semiotic form and substance" (Nöth [1990] 1995: 66). The author contends that, before being formed in a proper sign, both the expression and the content are semiotically amorphous matters. To become substance, in fact, the matter must be structured, that is organized in a specific and invariant form (Hjelmslev 1969: 52–53). Drawing on these premises, I believe that the translation transfer can be productively analysed through the following model (table 3):
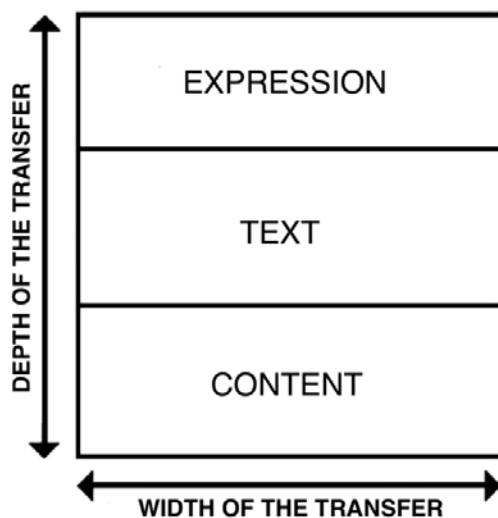
Table 3: The translation transfer: an analytical model.

According to this model, the units' transfer from the source-text to the target-text can occur first of all on three different levels of semiotic "depth:" the expression plane, the content plane, and the textual level. More precisely, this transfer can involve (1) elements that constitute the source-text's expression and/or content form – what Hjelmslev calls "figures," which are non-signs that "enter into a sign system as *parts* of signs [emphasis mine]" (1969: 46); (2) "real" signs, which are already manifested textual units. In the first case, the transfer implies the re-making of the source-text's content or/and expression figures: the figures are re-semiotized through the target-text's language, which means they are re-employed to produce a new sign. In the second case, instead, the transfer is based on the "repositioning" of integral signs from the source-text to the target-text.

Furthermore, as illustrated by the table above, the semiotic depth is intertwined with another factor, that of the semiotic "width" of the transfer. This other axis describes the "amount" of elements transferred from one text to another. More precisely, the width of the transfer oscillates between two ideal "extreme" poles: "punctuality" and "extensiveness." In the first case, the transfer involves specific figures, single texts units, a limited set of features, and so on; in the second, the transfer involves semiotic entities of bigger "size," for instance the whole narrative structure of the source-text, its discursive configuration, and/or broad portions of its textual structure.

However, the model proposed here can be articulated further. Using it as a backbone, it is possible to build a taxonomy of intersemiotic relations depending on the "site" in which the translation transfer occurs. This site is determined by the intertwining of two main factors: the plane of language, i.e. the expression/content axis seen above; and the aspect of language, i.e. the text (process)/system axis, as it is defined by structural semiotics. According to Structural Semiotics, the system is the set of possibilities that characterise a language, while the text (or process) represents an actual combination and manifestation of some of these possibilities (Floch 1985: 193). The connection between the system and the text is provided by an enunciative instance, that is by an "instance of mediation" (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 126) which transforms and converts the possibilities of the system into actual discourses. Through the superimposition of the plane of language axis on the aspect of language axis, it is possible to build the following taxonomy of intersemiotic relations (Table 4):
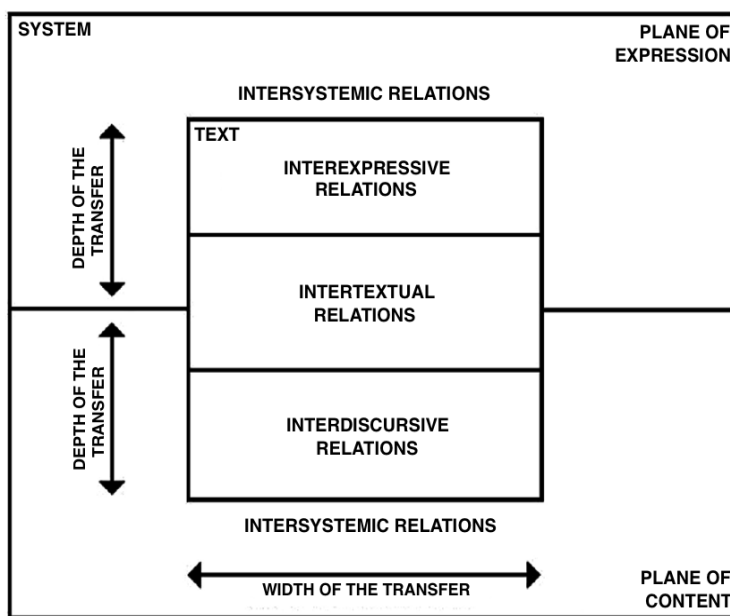
Table 4: Taxonomy of intersemiotic relations.

As the table above shows, depending on the site in which the translation transfer occurs, it is therefore possible to identify four macro-typologies of intersemiotic relations: interexpressive relations, based on the transfer of expression figures from a source-text to a target-text; interdiscursive relations, based on the transfer of discursive figures from a source-text to a target-text; intertextual relations, based on the transfer of "real" textual units from a source-text to a target-text; and intersystemic relations, based on the transfer of expression or content figures from a source-system to a target-text. The first three typologies are founded on the "horizontal" transfer of figures from a source-text to the target-text; the fourth typology is founded instead on the "vertical" transfer of figures from a source-system to a target-text.

Drawing on Greimasian generative semiotics, it is possible to distinguish the transferred figures according to their mode of semiotic existence (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 138-139). More precisely, it is possible to make a distinction among virtual figures, actual figures, and realized figures. The first ones are systemic figures, i.e. figures that pertain to a semiotic system and that have not been taken on by any enunciative instance; the second ones are discursive figures, i.e. more "concrete" figures that have already been enunciated, i.e. already put into discourse, but that have not been (yet) textually manifested; the third ones are textual figures, i.e. figures that have already been wholly manifested through one or more matters of expression. Starting from these premises, it is possible to say that the interdiscursive and the interexpressive relations are grounded on the transfer of actual figures from a source-text to a target-text; the intertextual relations are grounded on the transfer of realized figures from a source-text to a target-text; the intersystemic relations are grounded on the transfer of virtual figures from a source-system to a target-text.

Through the model here outlined it is possible to understand which transfer procedures constitute different intersemiotic relations and forms. For instance, the above-mentioned semiotic interferences in *Scott Pilgrim vs the World* are based on the punctual transfer into the movie of some expressive figures of the comics' system (that is the onomatopoeia), which in return constitutes some intersystemic relations between the film text and the comics' system. Or, the movie *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005) – the film adaptation of the comic book series by the same name (1982-1985) written by Alan Moore and pencilled by David Llyod – is grounded on the extensive cinematic transfer of the comic book series' discursive structure (i.e. the story and the plot), which in return constitutes an extensive interdiscursive relation between the movie and the comic book series. Or again, the title sequence of *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005) – the film adaptation of the comic book series of the same name (1991–2000), created by Frank Miller – is based on the punctual transfer into the movie of some textual fragments of the comic book series (i.e. some of the actual comic book's drawings), which in return constitutes some punctual intertextual relations between the film text and the comic book series (figure 2).
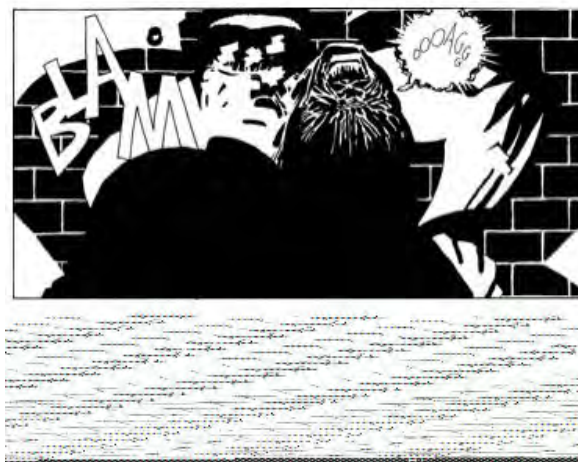
Fig. 2: An example of intertextual relations in the title sequence of *Sin City*.

4. *Sin City*: A case study

To further illustrate the model outlined in the last section, I will now proceed to analyse the movie *Sin City*. As just mentioned above, this movie is the film adaptation of the comic book series by the same name written and pencilled by Frank Miller and published by Dark Horse between 1991 and 2000. In particular, the movie draws on the volumes *The Hard Goodbye* (1991–1992), *The Big Fat Kill* (1994–1995), and *That Yellow Bastard* (1996) – respectively the first, the third and the fourth of the series –, and on the one-shot "The Customer Is Always Right" (1994), collected in the fifth volume of the series, *Booze, Broads & Bullets*. Every volume, as well as the one-shot, are translated into a specific episode of the movie.

Sin City is the result of a complex translation in which different transfer processes intertwine with one another. First of all, the movie is based on the extensive transfer of the content plane's form of the source-comic books. In other words, *Sin City* takes both its story and its plot (or *récit*) from the comic books: on the one hand, it draws its narrative universe and diegetic world from the comic books – or better, their existents (characters and settings) and events (actions and happenings), as Seymour Chatman would argue (1978 [1980]: 32); on the other hand, the film replicates the same narrative means through which the story is delivered in the comic books – and more precisely, its temporal organisation, its focalization processes, and its narrator types, in Gérard Genette's words ([1972] 1983: 35; 189-190; 228-229; 245).

For instance, the movie's opening sequence can be used to further support and exemplify some of the points made. The sequence, composed by 16 takes, is the cinematic translation of the one-shot "The Customer Is Always Right," composed by 10 panels distributed on three pages. If compared to the comic book, the film sequence shows the same characters (the professional killer and the young women waiting to die) making the same actions or being subjected to the same events (the killer offers the girl a cigarette; he hugs and kisses her; and he shots her with a silenced gun) in the same space and time (a terrace of a building in Basin City, during a rainy night). In Greimasian terms, the film sequence entirely takes from the comic book both its semantic "isotopies" (i.e. its thematic and figurative configurations) and its syntactic structure (i.e. its time, space, and actors) (Greimas and Courtés 1993: 198; 379–380). At the same time, the sequence tells this story through the same linear order, the same singulative frequency and

the same synchronic duration (Genette 1983: 34–35; 114) employed in the comic book's plot. Moreover, it employs the same type of narrator (extradiegetic-homodiegetic) and the same focalization strategy (external) (Genette 1983: 228-229; 245; 190). The sequence is therefore based on the extensive transfer and re-production of the comic book's narrative.

However, the translation of the source-comic books into the movie involves at least one *other dimension*. *Sin City* is also based, in fact, on the extensive transfer of the comic books' expression plane (or at least of some of its sub-levels). Drawing on Algirdas J. Greimas' ([1984] 1989: 627–649) notion of "plastic" semiotics, it is possible to say that the transfer involves primarily the chromatic and eidetic categories (Greimas 1989: 639–641) that articulate the source-comic book's expression plane. In other words, *Sin City* re-employs the very same "colours" and "forms" employed in the comic book. On the one hand, the film draws from the comic book the same high-contrast and expressionist black and white, and the same primary colours that occasionally "paint" some of the comic book's figures (such as the yellow of "that yellow bastard" in the fourth episode of the movie). On the other hand, the film re-employs the same outlines and contours that shape the comic book's spatial and actorial figures (e.g. the silhouettes of the buildings or the facial physiognomy of the characters). To sum up, the movie is based both on the extensive transfer of the comic book's content plane and on the extensive transfer of the comic book's chromatic and eidetic expressive sub-levels.

What just described can be read as the "global" translation strategy (to use a term formerly employed by Nicola Dusi [2003: 75–76]) that underlies the film in its entirety and its relationship with its source-texts. However, *Sin City* is also based on some other "local" translation tactics – i.e. tactics based on punctual transfers –, which cooperate to increase the intensity of the "global" strategy itself. As an example, I will compare two panels drawn from the volume *The Hard Goodbye* with the two film shots that represent their "filmic" translation (figures 3, 4).

Fig. 3: From the comic book to the movie: The "global" translation strategy.

In the first case (figure 3), the panel is translated into the shot according to the "global" translation strategy that underlies the whole movie. First of all, on the content plane, the shot reproduces the same fragment of the story (and of the plot) that is represented by the original panel: Marv tortures the hit man that has been sent to kill him, shooting him in a non-vital point, in order to extort information about the mysterious murder of the woman he loved (the prostitute Goldie). More precisely, both the panel and the film shot focus on Marv's efforts to gain the necessary "competence" (the knowing) in order to avenge Goldie, his "object of desire." Furthermore, on the expression plane, the shot reemploys the same eidetic and chromatic categories of the comic book: the high-contrast black and white, the sharp chiaroscuro, and the general "form" of the settings and characters (with significant work on the actors' makeup and digitally-enhanced set design).

Instead, in the second case (figure 4) the filmic translation of the panel is the product of a further translation investment, regarding in particular its expressive dimension and his general sign function. Like in the previous example, on the content plane the shot reproduces the same fragment of the story (and of the plot) presented by the panel: Goldie's twin sister Wendy hides in an alley spying on Marv, who she believes to be her sister's murderer. In the film shot, Wendy embodies the same actantial status she was characterized by in the original panel: from the narrative point of view, she is modalised as an opponent, characterized by a "wrong" knowing, who wants to kill Marv; from the enunciative point of view, she is an "observing subject" (Fontanille 1989: 17–21), who brings an internal point of view in the discourse.

Fig. 4: The translation of the "sign function."

On the expression plane, however, the shot diverges from the previous one for a fundamental reason. In this shot, in fact, forms and colours appear in the same position in which they are arranged in the comic book's panel. Drawing again on Greimas' plastic semiotics, it is possible to see that this shot is based not only on the transfer of the chromatic and eidetic categories of the source-panel, but also on the transfer of its topological categories, which, according to the Lithuanian semiotician (Greimas [1984] 1989: 14–15), underlie the positioning of the elements on the planar surface. Therefore, the shot re-enacts through the cinematic expressive substances the entire set of "plastic figures" that constitute the source-panel's visual expression form. In summary, the film shot is based on the translation of the panel's original "sign function" (to get back to Hjelmslev's expression), i.e. it is based on the transfer of the very same "system of relations" that connects the content form and the expression form in the comic book.

To conclude this quick analysis of *Sin City*, I will focus once again on the movie's opening sequence to discuss an issue previously overlooked. As already pointed out, this sequence is the translation of the short one-shot "The Customer Is Always Right," from which it extensively draws both the content plane and the expression plane (according to the global strategy and the local tactics described above). While the source-comic book is all in black and white, though, in the film sequence the girl's dress and lips are magenta red. In other words, the film sequence employs a chromatic category (the magenta red) that does not appear in the original comic book's panel. However, this added element is not the result of an "inner" production of the film sequence. On the contrary, the girl's red dress and lips are the product of *another* translation transfer – a punctual one, in this case. More precisely, the film sequence takes these figures from another one-shot of the comic book series, entitled "The Babe Wore Red" (1994) (also collected in the volume *Booze, Broads & Bullets*), whose main character is in fact a girl with a red dress and red lipstick (figure 5).

Therefore, not only is the opening sequence based on the extensive transfer of the content and expression planes of "The Customer Is Always Right," but also on the punctual transfer of

an expressive figure from a *different* source-text (although part of the same comic book series). Going back to our taxonomy of intersemiotic relations, the sequence establishes both an extensive interdiscursive and interexpressive relation with the one-shot "The Customer Is Always Right" and a punctual interexpressive relation with one-shot "The Babe Wore Red."

Fig. 5: A punctual interexpressive relation.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have developed an analytical model for the study of intersemiotic relations, in particular those established by cinema *towards* comics. I have considered those relations as the direct product of a translation, intended as the cultural process underlying (and regulating) the transfer of elements between different texts (and between different systems). In order to articulate this model, I have combined different theoretical traditions such as Cultural Semiotics, Descriptive Translation Studies, and Structural and Generative Semiotics.

First of all, drawing on Lotman's cultural theory, Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, and Toury's translation theory, I have identified the three different transfer processes (duplication, conformation, obliteration) through which translation is articulated, depending on whether or not elements of comics succeed in "passing through" the border of the cinematic target-system. Then, I have analysed the constraints that regulate the access of elements of the (comics) source-texts to the (cinematic) target-system, focusing in particular on the semiotic constraints.

Secondly, drawing on Hjelmslev's glossematics and Greimas's semiotic theory, I have identified the different "sites" in which the transfer process occurs in relation to the linguistic plane (expression/content/text) and to the linguistic aspect (system/process) involved. According to these distinctions, I have outlined a taxonomy of the main intersemiotic relations, identifying four main typologies: the intertextual, the interexpressive, the interdiscoursive, and the intersystemic. The analysis of some of the main translation processes inherent to the film *Sin City* has exemplified some of the concepts outlined and, at same time, has demonstrated the methodological performativity of this model.

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