

What Is Intersemiotics? A Short Definition and Some Examples

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Abstract—When it comes to studying the relationship between various forms of art, it is better to mention we talk for some time about the concept of intersemiotics at first, instead of intertextuality from which it is derived. My work responds briefly to what it is meant by intersemiotic. I will, of course, try to answer this question in the context of theories of intertextuality. In my work, I have no intention at all to remind you all the definitions of an intertextual approach, but only to transform some data of these theories in the context of an intersemiotic definition by reference to the practice of "ekphrasis" in the impressionistic novel by Zola: *The Work*.

In my work, I will distinguish some types of intersemiotic transposition which are in the passage of a literary text to another system of signs, i.e. non-verbal, and vice versa: this form would work in reverse; we can speak about a transition from a painting or a piece of music into a literary text. The intersemiotic provides tools to analyze literary texts from an interdisciplinary perspective. I will give some examples that show even a simple formal transformation is sufficient to create, within a given text, a semantic processing, a polyphonic space.

Index Terms—Intersemiotic, intertextuality, Zola, *The Work*, ekphrasis, painting, music.

I. INTRODUCTION

What is intersemiotics? Here is the object of this study. The aim of this presentation is to define what intersemiotics is. I'll try to answer briefly this question in relation to some theories of intertextuality. I have no intention at all to remember all definitions of an intertextual approach, but only to transform some data of these theories in the context of a definition of intersemiotics in reference particularly to "ekphrasis" practice in Zola's impressionist novel: *The Work*.

II. INTERTEXTUALITY

As it is known well, intertextuality shows exchanges between two or more literary texts. The hypothesis proposed is: "no text can be written regardless of what was already written and it wears, more or less visible, the trace and memory of a heritage and tradition." [1].

Drawing on the definitions proposed by J. Kristeva, Barthes makes the same assumption and offers a similar definition: "any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in forms more or less recognizable: the

texts of the previous culture and those of the surrounding culture; any text is a tissue of bygone new quotes." [2].

Using this assumption, several other theorists have defined in their own way the practice of intertextuality in literature. Here is Piégay-Gros's definition: "intertextuality is [...] the movement by which a text rewrites another text, and an intertext is all texts a work reflects, refers to them in absentia (for example, if there is an allusion) or inscribes them in praesentia (for example, if there is a quotation)." [3].

It is not necessary here to redefine and discuss all definitions of intertextuality proposed by Bakhtin, Kristeva, Riffaterre, Genette, Gignoux, Piégay-Gros etc. Yet let's just say that the concept of intersemiotic is closely related to definitions of intertextuality of these theorists.

Intertextual figures include allusion, quotation, calque, plagiarism, translation, pastiche, parody.

But what is the situation about relationship between a literary text, a painting or a piece of music? Do we continue to use the same concept of intertextuality?

III. FROM INTERTEXTUALITY TO INTERSEMIOTIC

The notion of intertextuality in the critical studies often extends in diverse domains. It's generally admitted that an intertext can belong to another language than the text into which it is introduced (foreign languages, various kinds of text, literary texts, images, etc.) or in another domain of art (cinema, photography, painting, music, etc.). Anne Claire Gignoux clarifies the confusion between intertextuality and intersemiotic; she proposes a new distinction between two terms. She makes a new definition of the text and applies the notion of intertextuality to music: "Nevertheless, the consensus about the definition of intertextuality turns on the notion of "text" [4]. For example, for Kristeva, "the text is a crossing of texts!" [5]. Genette uses a vocabulary, "which always contains in it the root "text" ("transtextuality, hypertextuality" etc.). Certainly, the term of "text" is favored for its etymological connotations of "texere": "interlacing, fabric (tissue), structure," "to weave, to braid," which emphasize the idea of "crossing of texts," in other words, the interdependence between hypertext and hypotext. They also allow the metaphor of "weft" and "fabric" ("tissue"). But we should not forget that for the semioticians but also in a common way, the text indicates the "discursive appearance of a system of signs." Relating to this issue A. Claire-Gignoux asks the following question: « is it justifiable to speak about intertextuality when a book evokes music? How do we describe the crossing which is then made between music and language? Must we speak about intertextuality? The relationship between text and music is different from a

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relationship between two texts, because music is not a text and cannot be it. It is spoken then about intersemiotics and not intertextuality" [6].

I would like to remind that this concept of intersemiotics is used first by Roman Jakobson in his *Essays of General Linguistic*. In the section headed « *On linguistic aspects of translation* », he distinguishes first the "intra-linguale translation", secondly the "interlingual translation" or the translation itself, thirdly the "intersemiotic translation" or the "transmutation", which consists of the interpretation (performance) of linguistic signs by means of systems of non-linguistic signs. At the end of the chapter, his definition is getting wider, because it authorizes a relation of any system of signs to any other one. R. Jakobson speaks about an "intersemiotic transposition" of a system of signs in another one; a passage from a system to another, for example, from an art of language (poem, novel) to music, dance, cinema, painting, etc. [7].

Meanwhile, in his *Sémiostylistique, l'effet de l'art*, (Semiostylistics, the effect of art), Georges Molini éputs the essential difference between the verbal art and the non-verbal arts, (music or painting belongs to that category); the verbal art says only something, which has a sense; other arts have no sense but a value, and do say nothing, but express the world. He eventually defines the intersemiotics: it is a "study of semiotic treatment of an art in the materiality of semiotic treatment of another art." [8].

The intersemiotics (translation or transposition) deals with two or more completely different codes, e.g., linguistic one vs. music and/or dancing, and/or image ones. Thus, when Tchaikovsky composed the *Romeo and Juliet*, he actually performed an intersemiotic translation: he 'translated' Shakespeare's play from the linguistic code into a musical one. The expression code was changed entirely from words to musical sounds. Then, as it was meant for ballet, there was a ballet dancer who 'translated' further, from the two previous codes into a 'dancing' one, which expresses itself through body movement.

Five categories are used to verify the analogy between intersemiotics and intertextuality, they refer to the intertextual practices described by Genette; these categories are transposable into the field of music or painting or into another discipline of art [4] (pp. 243-248).

These categories are as follows:

- 1) The *intertextuality*, which is defined by Genette as an effective presence of a text in another one (by a quotation or an allusion), it will correspond for example in a musical work to the presence of a melodic "sentence" borrowed from another work. Nevertheless, the music cannot quote a picture or a text, it can do it only in its title or in the words of a piece of music which is sung.
- 2) The second is the *paratextuality* (the relationship) of a literary work to its paratexte (title, subtitles, foreword and notes). A musical work can maintain relationships with its title, foreword, its infra-paginal notes. The title of "pastoral" symphony can influence every interpretation of a novel.
- 3) The third is the *metatextuality* defined as a "relation of comment which unites a text with another text about which it speaks"; it will correspond to comments on the

music. These are inevitably verbal. This type of relationship is the matter of the intersemiotic, because it confronts a music to a verbal comment developed from this music.

- 4) The fourth is the *architextuality*; it is for Genette the relationship of a text to its genre; and that category has its equivalent in music: the relationship of a musical work to a genre which it refers to or which it parodies. The examination of this type of relationships requires a good cultural background on the musical history.
- 5) The fifth category is the *hypertextuality*; it is defined as "any relation uniting a text B (that Genette calls hypertext) with a previous text A (that he calls hypotext).

To summarize, the intersemiotics is defined as the "circulation of meaning between different sign systems; for example, the image includes reference to the text, and the text referring to the image." [6] (pp. 98-99).

We can distinguish several types of intersemiotics transposition; the main type of transposition is in the passage of a literary text to another system of signs, non-verbal and vice versa: this form could function quite reverse: we can thus talk about passing a painting or a musical piece into a literary text (for example *The Luncheon on the Grass* by Manet in Emile Zola's *Work*; *Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince* in Art Mengo's eponymous song) [9]. All forms of adaptation belong to this category. The film adaptation of a particular book is one of the modalities (for example, Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, a French-East German-Italian film adaptation, written by Michel Audiard and René Barjavel, directed by Jean-Paul Le Chanois). Since the form of transposition can be reduced to the recovery of some motifs in a story and vice versa, then we may be interested in "the study of the literary text structures that borrow from the language of music (the symphony in Michel Butor's *the Employment Time*) or painting ("*The Luncheon on the Grass*" by Manet in Emile Zola's *Work*). Most often, the authors call for the practice of *ekphrasis* to transpose the pictorial elements in a different context and to derive a new work, which corresponds in some ways to the process of rewriting as it is used in theories of intertextuality.

IV. EXAMPLES: ART MENGO'S *THE LITTLE PRINCE* AND EMILE ZOLA'S *THE WORK*

These theoretical elements guide us for an intersemiotic reading of relations between literature and any other forms of non-verbal arts: music, painting, architecture etc. By using the data of this theoretical course, we discover in song lyrics several traces of literature. Here are some examples among others.

Particularly, in popular music, we find diverted and recycled presence of other forms of art (literature occupies the first place). For example, Art Mengo's *The Little Prince* makes an explicit reference, by the title, to Saint-Exupéry's eponymous novel. We discover moreover here a literal quotation made by the artist: "Draw me a sheep!" He borrows from Saint-Exupéry the universe of dream and childhood. The influence of the surrealist poetry is present besides in the whole of Art Mengo's repertory. The texts of Art Mengo's songs borrow regularly from the literature,

forging links between surrealism, poetry and song. The singer creates a universe full of childish images. His universe enters in a resonance with the poetic one, involving happy and melancholic images. "Draw me a sheep" remains the only literal quotation of the source text. The rest of the text seems rather a product of a free association of idea, assembling some images in *The Little Prince*: "wheat fields", "diamond twilight", "desert", "evenings of uncertainty" etc.

The *ekphrasis*, guided by the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, is, as known, a term used in the context of rhetoric; it originally means any precise and detailed description of a painting. The description by Homer in *the Iliad*, "The Shield of Achilles" being forged by the god Hephaestus, is the best-known prototype.

The *ekphrasis* marks passage from a visual representation system to a linguistic representation. It is, therefore, a representation in the second level: the representation of a representation. In this case, the *ekphrasis* is not an artistic strategy to represent reality directly. Rather, it is the reconstruction of a form of construction of the reality.

The modern definition of the term refers to a form of description of an art work embedded in a narrative: the relation of that process to intertextuality or to what is called 'intersemiotic'.

The ekphrastic representation of an art work pushes us to link it to the phenomenon of intersemiotics; the definition proposed by G. Molinié in his *Dictionnaire de Rhétorique* reveals this relationship between the two processes: *ekphrasis* is a coded model of discourse that describes a representation (painting, architectural motif, sculpture, jewelry, tapestry); so this representation is both itself an object of the world, a theme to be dealt, and an artistic treatment already made in another semiotic or symbolic system other than language.

The study of *ekphrasis* in Emile Zola's *Work* proposes essentially the study of differences and similarities between pictorial and verbal on a semantic and formal level; the practice of *ekphrasis* is a transformation of the code on a signifier and the signified level. Adding that it is a question here to perceive the type of transposition carried out by the author to transmit, in his way, a different message.

As part of problematics of the anachronism of *ekphrasis*, in his "*Ekphrasis: major problematics of the concept*", Nicolas Wanlin talks about the distance of "look of the descriptor on the artwork" [10]. For decryption, interpretation and re-evaluation of distance against the work of which it will begin to operate an adversarial process, which is the major trend for each intertextual reading or intersemiotic. The *ekphrasis* becomes "a place of confrontation of two times, two cultures, two value systems, even two philosophies of representation."

Another sense arises from this confrontation, as the context in which the borrowed object is introduced. The process of transformation "is to remove from an object its original function and to attribute to it another one."

For the evaluation of the object lodged in its new environment, where it is semiotised, it is now regarded as a sign of the quoting text and mondained through the practice of *ekphrasis*, we must go from a culture that allows its own categorization. Once a painting is transposed in a literary text, we talk about a change of the 'medium': thus, we go

from the pictorial to the verbal.

In an unlimited set of transsemiotic relationships, in *ekphrasis*, the role of the secondary medium (or semiosis) of commentary is filled by verbal language, by metalanguage par excellence; the metalanguage of all languages (and all semiosis). This establishes a significant specificity of *ekphrasis*: the medium is probably capable of providing categorizations and finer, richer axiological positions. In the pictorial / verbal confrontation, the specificity of verbal language is its unique ability to feel the irony, distance, emphasis, etc. It is therefore proposed that the stylistic study of *ekphrasis* is particularly attentive to the status of verbal language as the language of commentary par excellence and in this particular case it is facing to the other that is painting.

In nineteenth century literature, we are at the height of *ekphrasis* practice through Balzac novel. Zola is another prominent representative of this practice of *ekphrasis*, particularly in his *The Work*.

Zola was in charge of a write-up of Salon 1866, where he defends refused artists. In *Mon Salon 1866*, he tells the story of a painter who committed suicide for having been refused by the jury and ridiculed by the crowd. He writes his articles on art for the artists who represent the birth of modern art.

Zola celebrates Manet, who is strongly criticized by his "violence of colors, his lacks of technical skills, his immorality of the subjects; they are some criticisms addressed to Claude in *The Work*." The topic of Immorality refused by the jury of Salon refers to Manet's *Olympia*, which appears scandalous in the eyes of painters of the time.

In *The Work*, the reaction to Claude's *Plein Air* is a reference to *The Luncheon on the Grass* by Manet. Zola attacks the pictorial tradition, which is poorly tolerated by the new generation of painters and writers: "The gentleman in a velvet jacket was entirely drafted; [...] Small silhouettes of the bottom, the two women fighting in the sun, seemed to have remote, in the bright thrill of clearing; while the large figure, naked and reclining woman, barely indicated again, was still floating" [11].

As great admirer of Manet, Zola transposes here the painting to characterize the character of Claude Lantier and insert his painting in a pictorial current (impressionism) that he defends. To describe his main character, Zola borrows traits of his artist friends, including Cézanne and Manet. The perfectionist attitude of Cézanne, whose first paintings are refused by the Salon, is more common than Claude Manet's one. Manet was the main source for Zola. The *Lunch on the Grass* is the main reference for Claude Lantier; the *Plein Air* is a transposition of Manet's provocative painting, he takes up the theme of the *Luncheon on the Grass* (which refers to Marcantonio Raimondi's *Le Jugement de Pâris* - *The Judgement of Paris* - according to Raphaël).

Through the multiple descriptions introduced in the novel, Zola has initially a posture of a hyperrealist photographer. In addition to this photographic technique, the author also multiplies the practice of *ekphrasis* paintings. Finally, the strong presence of impressionist practices is another aspect affecting the pictoriality in the novel. The transition from one code to another materializes the intersemiotic character of the novel.

V. CONCLUSION

The intertextuality proposes to provide a comparative approach to several texts to show their polyphonic characteristics. The notion of intersemiotic is inspired by theoretical data carried out by post-structuralist theoreticians as a result of temptation of a new definition of text around 1960-1980.

Adopted as a method to evaluate the dialogic aspect of a literary text, to highlight the presence of heterogeneous elements, I was able to show that, in particular, Emile Zola's Work is largely supplied by materials of the impressionist painting in term of content and style. The use of ekphrasis allows us consider the impressionist style adopted by Zola, who has been an strong defender of modern art represented by Manet.

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