Between the Between: Film Adaptations of Novels and the Story of Nezha under Different Times Environments

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Abstract:

In the introduction to Handbook of Intermediality: Literature-Image-Sound-Music, Herzogenrath divides the term "intermediality" into "inter" and "medium", and suggests the literal definition, "between the between" (Herzogenrath 2). Gabriele Rippl believes that the term "intermediality" can be directly explained by means of the phrase "between the between", which indicates that the locus of the intermedial lies in the space between two media. This has given rise to a major trend in media research. *Nezha's triangle against the Dragon King (1979)* and *Nezha: Birth of The Demon Child (2019)*, as the adapted films of the same text at different times, combined with intertextuality and defamiliarization theory, are conducive to the research of a specific form of intermediary: film adaptations of novel. Furthermore, new developments such as digital technology will continue to provide new directions for intermedial research in the future. As creators continue to combine and separate diverse media, intermediality studies are likely to increase in relevance over time. Furthermore, new developments such as digital technology will continue to provide new directions for intermedial research in the future with outer changeable times environment.

Keywords: Intermediality; Film adaptation; novel; Nezha

I. INTRODUCTION

The term "medium" derives from the Latin word *medius*, which literally translates as "middle". It came into English in 1930 and has been used more and more widely. Thus, the term "medium" has become ambiguous. For example, sociologists regard media as including television, radio, and motion pictures, whereas artists regard media as including bronze, watercolour, and photography [1]. The definition of the derivative term "intermediality" is ambiguous and contentious. In recent years, however, a broad consensus over the term's definition has emerged, as has a typology of intermedial configurations. In the introduction to *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature-Image-Sound-Music*, Herzogenrath divides the term "intermediality" into "inter" and "medium", and suggests the literal definition, "between the between" [2]. This definition may come to serve as the underlying logic for several theories and practices concerning intermediality. I will use two films to analyze some of them.

This paper focuses on a specific form of intermediality: film adaptations of novels. In the first section, I discuss the concept of "between the between" in relation to film adaptations of literary works. Then, in the second section, I delve into the films Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King (1979) and Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), which are both adaptations of the 16th century Chinese novel, The Investiture of the Gods. These films represent two categories of film adaptations for different times environments: adaptations that remain faithful to the text, and adaptations that are looser and more subversive. In the third section, I discuss the theories of intertextuality and defamiliarization in relation to these film adaptations.

II. "BETWEEN THE BETWEEN" AND THE RELATION BETWEEN FILM AND THE NOVEL

While scholars of literature and cultural media disagree on the definition of "medium", it is generally accepted that the term has to do with "the production, distribution and reception of signs" [1]. Additionally, I believe that the term connotes a relationship between symbols or media elements, as well as a relationship between the sender and the receiver. In a film, for example, there is dialogue (text), composition (image), and sound (background music and human voice); the film is not the product of just one of these elements, but all of them are taken together. In the more specific medium of a still image film, the interactive elements include the colour of the picture, the objects depicted, and the spatial relationships between those objects. Through the confluence of these elements, the film director transmits ideas to the receivers (i.e., the audience), who then generate their own ideas by combining the transmitted elements in different ways.

Gabriele Rippl gives an overview of the presence of the "between the between" in scholarly treatments of intermediality [3]. For example, in his seminal 1966 article "Intermedia", Dick Higgins describes the intermedium as an "uncharted land" that exists between different media. Other prominent intermediality theorists, such as Werner Wolf and Irina Rajewsky, have proposed typologies that allow us to distinguish various intermedial phenomena. Rajewsky holds that there are two fundamental interpretations of intermediality: one broader and the other narrower. Rajewsky divides the narrower concept of intermediality into three subcategories: medial transformation (transformation from one medium to another, such as a film adaptation of a novel), media combination (a combination of at least two media products, for example, a film version of an opera), and intermedial reference (applying the characteristics of one medium to another, as in montage and camera obscura) [1]. In such classificatory schemas, the concept of the "between the between" serves as the foundation: starting from this basis, scholars like Rajewsky go on to elaborate on the relationship between media, such as external form and imitation of internal elements.

My concern in this paper is with film adaptations of novels. In this intermedial context, the author conveys the dialogue and scene descriptions through the text and, in the adaptation process, these elements are matched to the people, images, and sounds presented in the film, thus effecting a transposition from one element of the text to many elements of the film. During this process, it emerges that the adaptation is a complex intermedial system, consisting of connections not only between the two media, but also the relationship between the internal elements of each media. Marshall McLuhan defined the medium as a

kind of artificial limb: an extension of the human body or consciousness (as quoted in [3]). Of course, film is included in this broad definition.

III. NEZHA'S TRIUMPH AGAINST THE DRAGON KING (1979) AND NEZHA: BIRTH OF THE DEMON CHILD (2019) UNDER DIFFERENT TIMES ENVIRONMENTS

Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King was produced in 1979 by Shanghai Animation Film Studio. The film is adapted from The Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen Yanyi), a Ming Dynasty Chinese novel written in the 'gods and demons' (shenmo) genre [4]. While the mythical figure of Nezha predates the novel, The Investiture of the Gods is the first text that tells the entire story of Nezha's life, from birth to godhood [5]. Nezha, who was born with three heads and six arms, becomes a target of vengeance after killing Ao Bing, the third son of the Dragon King. To protect his friends and relatives from the Dragon King's wrath, Nezha commits suicide by removing his own flesh and bones. Later, the immortal Taiyi Zhenren resurrects Nezha in a new body made of lotus roots, and the reincarnated Nezha defeats the Dragon King and protects his family and friends. Nezha is thus a figure in the traditional Chinese "hero image": The Investiture of the Gods and Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King are both works that seek to emphasise this heroic status [5].

In The Investiture of the Gods, Nezha's mother Lady Yin was pregnant for three years and six months before giving birth to an amorphous ball of flesh. Nezha's father, Li Jing, was shocked at this and cut the fleshy ball with his sword. Out jumped Nezha, wearing a gold bracelet and a red damask robe—these were Nezha's magical weapons. The images of the flesh ball and the young Nezha are almost entirely preserved in the film. The animated characters in the film are designed in such a way that the audience can instantly infer their personalities. Li Jing, for example, never smiles and always has a serious expression, while the Dragon King has a perpetual look of ferocious rage. Furthermore, all the characters of this film are simple, two-dimensional figures [6]: Nezha is a straightforward hero who knows what is right and wrong, Li Jing is a strict father who mistreats his children, and so forth. The film conveys the father's character by having him respond to external events with indifference or blame; the Dragon King, in contrast, responds with drastic actions, such as avenging his son by unleashing a flood on the village. The film also complements the plot with its use of background music. When the Dragon King decides to flood the village, for example, the music is tense and hurried; with sound like thunderstorm, the music conveys the gravity of the situation and creates a sense of oppression. These are just a few examples of how the transposition from text to image remains faithful to the original text. Because of this, the animated images and narrative content of Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King (1979) have served as a model for several later films about Nezha.

There is, however, a marked contrast between the sprawling scope of the novel and the more limited narrative presented in the film. Much of Nezha's life is not depicted in the film, whose main focus is on those fragments of the text that concern Nezha defeating the Dragon King to protect his village. To establish Nezha as a relatable protagonist, bloody scenes such as Nezha's gruesome suicide are watered down or omitted. Nezha is also given a youthful, teenage appearance to increase his appeal to young

audiences. While the juvenile Nezha maintains the heroic image presented in the novel, this design choice makes Nezha into someone younger viewers can see as a friend and makes the character easier to understand and remember. The film adaptation thus expands the audience for this complex classical Chinese text, allowing even young children to experience the allure of Chinese traditional literature. Film adaptations can often extend the life of a novel in this manner; for example, the Harry Potter films are now better known than the novels on which they are based, which were published between 1997 and 2007.

Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019) holds the single-day box office record for animated films in China. According to Nezha's official release, the final box office of the film exceeded 5 billion. It is widely regarded as a symbol of the rise of Chinese animated cinema [7]. While using the same plot as Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King (1979) as a backdrop, the later film almost entirely abandons the traditional text, thus defamiliarizing the novel. Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019) is therefore generally seen as an alternative adaptation of the historical shenmo epic, rather than a remake of Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King (2019) [8]. This is primarily because Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019) subverts the character of Nezha, the logic of the plot, and—to a degree—the story's ideological core.

The only elements of the text retained in the film are Nezha's clothes and weapons, and the antagonistic relationship between Nezha and the Dragon King. The film adaptation emphasises the combination of traditional text and modernity. The text, for example, emphasises Nezha's heroic deeds, which are at odds with the values of his family. In the film, however, the theme of family is an essential plot point [9-10]. Nezha is depicted as a lonely child in modern China, longing for the company of family and friends, and hoping to gain attention through rebellion. Nezha's mother has recently transitioned from housewife to exorcist and, while she retains her strong, motherly love for her children, she also possesses a strong personal will. Through such recognisable familial tropes, the film seeks to resonate with the audience's lives, enhancing our engagement with the strange plot while also tugging at our heartstrings. Reactions to the film have been extremely polarised. Its admirers believe that the modern setting and tropes help to provide a fresh perspective on the traditional text, which the film renders accessible to a modern audience. The film's detractors, on the other hand, believe that it is disrespectful towards traditional culture and a symbol of cultural decline [9-10].

In this type of adaptation, where the text is mostly changed save for a few canonical elements, the original text no longer exists as a complete work, but rather as a sign or cultural symbol [9-10]. For example, the Monkey King—a traditional symbol of wisdom—has appeared as the protagonist in several advertisements for healthcare products, especially ones marketed towards children. Such transformations prove that the statement "between the between" can be widely used in work analysis. We are no longer limited to the study of the characteristics of a work but see the transformation of the two media involved in the works. Can see more clearly the dynamic development of those elements as they are extricated from their original context. We not only analyze the static elements of the work but see the dynamic process of the elements. As Higgins put it, the intermedial is the "uncharted territory" that lies between different media (as quoted in [3].). As a result, the phrase "between the between" can be considered a source of the

spear shield point.

IV. INTERTEXTUALITY, DEFAMILIARIZATION, AND INTERMEDIALITY

Intertextuality theory investigates the relationship between two texts, contending that each text is embedded in prior texts and is always related to them [10]. After reading a work, readers will subconsciously form the characters, plots and other elements of the work. When he encounters similar elements in other works, the elements will stimulate his subconscious. Therefore, the original work will have an impact on the reader's subsequent reading. This forms the relationship between the two texts. This proves that intertextuality and defamiliarization are also related to the statement "between the between". For example, when an audience familiar with the traditional appearance of Nezha watches Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), which significantly departs from tradition, there is a sense in which the audience is meeting the protagonist for the first time. However, because the film retains Nezha's traditional clothes and hairstyle, it nevertheless evokes memories of the original text. As a result of this intertextual interplay between the adaptation and the original memory, the audience has a sense of freshness, their minds stimulated, and their curiosity piqued.

The term "defamiliarization", coined by the Russian formalist critic Shklovsky, refers to the removal of an object from its normal sensory field and reconstructing that object through creative means, thus rendering cognition more difficult and allowing us to see that object anew (Pan 108). Defamiliarization thus involves a juxtaposition between two works, constituting a relationship of "between-ness". In Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), the defamiliarization process occurs when the film is compared to the original memory of the text: Nezha is no longer an archetypal hero, but a naughty child. This increases the story's cognitive difficulty for audiences familiar with the Nezha story. This is only one manifestation of defamiliarization in the transformation from text to film; indeed, the technique crops up in several other film adaptations of Chinese shenmo novels, such as Monkey King: Hero Is Back (2015).

The phrase "between the between" represents one of the most important contributions to intertextuality and defamiliarization theory and has found numerous applications across both literature and mass media. While both theories are immediately concerned with the relationship between two or more texts, they can also be applied to the process of transposing literature into other media. Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019) also exemplifies the growing trend of media commenting on, copying, and replacing each other. According to Rippl, this procedure is necessary, and media must cooperate (62). Perhaps, with the assistance of new media and digital technology, theories about intermediality will expand to incorporate political and economic elements, as manifested in, for example, postcolonial literary texts. The concept of the "between the between" enables all fields amenable to media exposure to become part of art.

The statement "between the between" can only be used when there is a transformation between at least two media. And in traditional, these two or more things have boundaries. Intermedial scholars say there is no "pure" media. Art is the product of history and collection; It is not a single-purpose tool (Carroll 16). However, media boundaries and medial particularities are indeed critical [11]. Furthermore, when media

interact, it will have the characteristics of "as if", that is, one media will have the qualities of another media, but it will not be totally replicated [11-13]. The media's uniqueness has not fully vanished. An intermediality is required for ontology (as quote in [3]). This demonstrates that while the word "intermediality" is predicated on the existence of a media border, intermedial practise and theory strive to abolish and transcend media boundaries [3]. The concept of intermediality has been put into question as a result of the ambiguity of the border. As a result, the phrase "between the between" may be perceived as contradictory.

V. CONCLUSION

Gabriele Rippl believes that the term "intermediality" can be directly explained by means of the phrase "between the between", which indicates that the locus of the intermedial lies in the space between two media. This has given rise to a major trend in media research. Although the scope of this paper is limited to two film adaptations of a novel under different times environments, we may conclude from these examples that—in keeping with the concept of the "between the between"—an artwork can be analyse through two or more media. It is very different results if we only foucs on the work itself. Furthermore, the paper extends the scope of literary theory into intermedial field. As creators continue to combine and separate diverse media, intermediality studies are likely to increase in relevance over time. Furthermore, new developments such as digital technology will continue to provide new directions for intermedial research in the future with outer changeable times environment.

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