

## TRANSLATING TRAUMA NARRATIVES: THE CASE OF SEPETYS' NOVEL “BETWEEN SHADES OF GRAY” AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATION TITLED “ASHES IN THE SNOW” BY MARKEVICIUS (2018)

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**Abstract:** The twentieth century witnessed an abundant number of traumatic events related to dark history, like exiles and repressions by the Soviet regime in Lithuania in 1940-1953. In a single week of June 1941, the Soviets exiled 2% of the entire Lithuania's population, while the total number reached nearly 14%. At the time, when it was allowed to speak about the unspeakable events of travelling to and surviving imprisonment in different concentration camps, numerous important works of various genres were published.

The first historical novel in English - *Between Shades of Gray* - was written in 2011 by Ruta Sepetys, the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee. The novel was translated into 30 languages. In 2018 Marius A. Markevicius adapted the novel into a film titled “Ashes in the Snow.”

The aim of the research is to discuss trauma and its reflection in literature and cinema, focusing on translation as screen adaptation. The novelty of the paper lies in the topic of (re)focalization when dealing with screen adaptation in relation to collective or personal traumas embodied in literary works. The concepts of conventional translation and adaptational translation by Henrik Gotlieb (2017: 52) are also discussed. The analysis of trauma is based on Cathy Caruth's ideas who defines traumatic memories as non-verbal, so filmmakers have to find a way to express trauma when language becomes inaccessible and inadequate (Caruth 1996: 3-6).

Gerard Genette's three types of focalization, - zero, internal and external, - as well as visible and invisible narrator in the story, offer a new approach to the study of audiovisual translation from the perspective of screen adaptation according to the external and internal position of the focalizer in the narrative: perceptual, psychological and ideological.

**Keywords:** trauma narratives, translation, adaptation, (re)focalization

### 1. Introduction

The concept of trauma is complex and has been used in the modern world in a variety of discourses - from the personal to the global one. Trauma is not always experienced directly, as traumatic events and their victims are also reported on television or in the

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press. Miscellaneous specialists, literary critics and writers look back to the past historical traumatic events to show that such damage has long-lasting consequences - physical and psychological, national and international. Moreover, such consequences persist from generation to generation. Thus, the traumatic experience of such events is experienced by a large number of individuals, even though the intensity of the impact can vary considerably.

According to Antony Beevor (2014: 32-33), for those who have not directly experienced historical traumas or who grew up in a demilitarized society after the Cold War, find it difficult or even impossible to understand the complexity and impact of such traumas, but some historical traumatic events, such as the Second World War, are still pertinent today. Understanding the past and finding parallels with the present helps present-day writers, who address historical traumas of the past to show that conflicts and events of the present can have similar consequences today. Contemporary writers and film directors have learned about these traumas from their parents' stories, and these traumas have also haunted them for decades, reminding of past dramatic events. In the majority of cases, the authors of such narratives are the descendants of the survivors of the traumatic events of the twentieth century.

Books about the Second World War, published in the United States, usually pertain to the Holocaust. In the case of *Between the Shades of Gray* by a Lithuanian-American writer of historical fiction, Ruta Sepetys, the American reader has the opportunity to learn about an event that few people know: the atrocities suffered by the inhabitants of the Soviet-occupied Baltic States. Americans are reminded that the Soviets deported Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians to Siberia, condemning them to death, but also aiming to wipe these countries off the world map.

## 2. Trauma and Its Reflections in Literature and Cinema

In Lithuania as well as in many other countries, films based on historical traumas have been instrumental in shaping the identity of the nation and the concept of national culture. Mirela Lapugean regards trauma as "a very intense reaction of the mind to an uncontrollable and extremely powerful external event, having as a result an acute psychological damage" (2015: 86). Under Hitler and Stalin, the Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered fourteen million people in the bloodlands between Berlin and Moscow. The killing fields extended from central Poland to western Russia. For twelve years, on this blood-soaked soil an average of one million individuals - mostly women, children and the elderly - were murdered every year. Though in 1939 these lands became battlefields, not one of these fourteen million was killed in combat. They were victims of a murderous policy, not casualties of war. In Lithuania, during the whole period of deportation (1941-1953) more than 132000 people were expelled to Siberia and only less than a half, about 60000, managed to return to their home country.

At the time when it was allowed to speak about the unspeakable events, such as travelling to and surviving imprisonment in different concentration camps, numerous important works of various genres were published. A great amount of biographies, memories, diaries, testimonies were released. In general, they can be called trauma

novels that convey, as Michelle Balaev (2014: 4) observes, “profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels.”

Trauma novel comprises a great variety of feelings and emotions that can be expressed through “landscape imagery, temporal fissures, silence, or narrative omission” (Balaev 2014: 5). Also, writers choose a nonlinear plot or inconsistent storyline in order to reveal chaos, psychological condition, uncertainty as a response to the happening events. The description of the setting is significant in trauma novels as “nature and culture converge to construct meaning and inform both individual and collective identity” (Balaev 2014: 11). The protagonist’s feelings are shown through the description of the place which is usually very detailed and informative and has its symbolic meaning for the hero and reveals the historical event better. The description of the place also helps distinguish between the traumatic reality in exile and the secure past in the home country.

The traumatic experience has involved cinema as well. Hidden traumatic wounds are better shown and understood through images and encourage discussions and debates in society. Cathy Caruth defines traumatic memories as “non-verbal,” so filmmakers have to find a way to express trauma when language becomes inaccessible and inadequate (1996: 13). In trauma theory, sound has always been considered as memory provoking, i.e., if a traumatic experience was lived through, the memory of the incident may resurface whenever a specific sound is heard.

### **3. Translation as Adaptation**

Most commonly translation is seen as the transference of a written text between two languages, however, throughout the years, it has gained more meanings. As Roman Jakobson points out, translation can be intralingual translation (translation within one language), interlingual translation (translation between two languages), intersemiotic translation (translation from language to a non-verbal system) (1959: 233). This entails that translation can be viewed not only as a transference into other signs of one language but also as conveying verbal symbols into a non-verbal system.

In its beginnings, intersemiotic translation was seen as involving language, however “since not all languages are verbal” and, when referring to film translation specifically, “no text can be made entirely of verbal signs because such signs always need some sort of physical support” and the text can be defined as “any combination of sensory signs carrying communicative intention” (Gotlieb 2017: 50), the meaning of intersemiotic translation now also includes translation of signs into other signs with no necessity for verbal language. This means that intersemiotic translation is nonverbal translation concerned with how meaning changes from one medium to the another and therefore directly correlates with adaptation, as adaptation is a process of translation from the original medium to the adapted one. It is also important to note that intersemiotic translation is not just seen as an adaptation, but is also divided into two categories, depending on the freedom the translator is provided with: conventional and adaptational translation (Gotlieb 2017: 51). Conventional translation is seen as bound to the original and therefore provides little freedom to the translator.

Adaptational translation, on the other hand, “is found whenever the existence and reception of one text triggers the production of another based on the first. The resulting text will relate to the original in a way which is more detached and less predictable than in conventional translation. Following from this is the inability to reconstruct the original from the translated version, something which – to a certain extent – is possible with conventional translation” (Gotlieb 2017: 52). Adaptational translation is therefore more distant from the source text, allowing the translator more freedom of choice.

Furthermore, adapting a book is like translating into another language, in which the adapter should transfer the spirit of the original text. The main differences lie in the perception of literary and audiovisual work: reading a printed book is thoroughly different from watching a film owing to multimodal channels of provided information that comprise motions, nature sounds, symbols, colours and words.

#### 4. Characteristics of Focalization in Literature and Film Narratives

Gerard Genette defines focalization as “the relation between the vision and that which is “seen,” perceived” (1988: 100). In the narrative text we have *focalizer* and *focalized*. A focalizer accomplishes the vision while a focalized is the object of that vision. Genette distinguishes three types of focalization: zero focalization, internal focalization and external focalization (Genette 1988: 75).

Furthermore, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan expresses the idea that only the visual sense of “focalization” is too restrictive. She distinguishes three aspects of it according to external/internal position of the focalizer in the narrative: the perceptual facet is perceived through the five human senses that are decided by space and time; the psychological facet deals with mind and emotions; the ideological facet involves norms of the narrative that “are presented through a single dominant perspective” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 2002: 81).

The psychological aspect can be determined either by the cognitive or by the emotive components. The emotive component implies an individual’s feelings, attitude towards the focalized. The external focalizer is familiar with what is happening in the story and if they limit the information they provide this is due to rhetorical thoughts, i. e. to increase interest or tension in the text. The internal focalizer is a part of the fictional world (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 2002: 80). The subjectivity of an internal focalizer can be seen through the different descriptions of the same place that can vary depending on the narrator’s mood and feelings.

There are special techniques to create internal focalization in filming. Focalization in cinema helps the film director to express the overall feeling of the film the way they want the audience to see it. It may be expressed through a certain composition, camera angle, focus, etc.

### **5. Translating Trauma: The Case of *Between the Shades of Gray* by R. Sepetys and Its Cinematic Adaptation Titled “Ashes in the Snow” by M. Markevicius**

*Between the Shades of Gray* is based on the testimony of Lina Vilkas, a fifteen-year-old girl, who managed to survive ten years of rigorous living conditions and returned to her home country. In fact, Lina is a representative of thousands of children in exile. To employ Michelle Balaev’s (2014: 5) formulation, the writer tells her “unique traumatic experience, yet, the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined.”

The protagonist of the novel is a sixteen-year-old Lina Vilkas who, in 1941, is preparing for art school and the summer holidays in her hometown of Kaunas in Lithuania. However, her father Kostas Vilkas is involved in the Lithuanian resistance against the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States, forging documents to help people escape Lithuania. One night, Lina, along with her mother Elena, younger brother Jonas and friend Andrius are abducted by the NKVD and deported by train to a gulag in the Altaysky region in Siberia.

Since traumatic memories are “non-verbal,” film producers had to show them through different sounds such as the use of the foreign language, rumbling train, rail squeal, cries that reveal different ideologies and involvement into traumatic experiences. The viewers are taken back to a long-lasting traumatic period that generates inner changes, in particular identity changes.

In 1941, the Soviets annexed Lithuania into the Soviet Union and the symbols of the regime could be seen around the city of Kaunas. The Soviet symbols are shown in separate shots without any explanation in the film. Still, seeing men in uniforms, red posters, a large sculpture of Stalin, and single-engine and single-seat fighters above the city, the viewers may assume these are the signs of occupation.

Here attention is devoted to paralanguage. To rely upon Frederic Chaume’s formulation (2012: 101), there are three ways of transmitting paralanguage to the viewers and one of them is employed in the film: non-verbal information, which is shown without any explanation, as the audience is supposed to interpret the information according to their knowledge of the subject.

The combination of three languages can be heard on the screen: English, Russian and Lithuanian. Though the main language in the film is English, several Russian phrases, especially rough jargon, are left untranslated. In addition, different camera movements are used to highlight trauma: low, neutral and high camera angles, full shot, medium shot and close-up shot sizes also help reveal suffering and fear.

In addition, aural focalization and the Russian language intensify dismay. The Vilkas family is an educated family living in Kaunas. They keep warm and respectful relationships with each other, but one day their idyllic way of life changes. One early morning, shouting and threatening men appear at their doorstep and cause anxiety, especially to children. The theme of exile in the novel emerges from the beginning:

It wasn’t a knocking. It was an urgent booming that made me jump in my chair. Fists pounded on our front door. (Sepetys 2011: 4)

There are two loud knockings followed by threats in Russian, to break down the front door in screen adaptation. In this episode, the focus is on the soldier's fist which represents Russian officers' brutal physical behaviour. We can also see the shadow of the rifle that looms over the family during the exile period. Jonas does not speak Russian but he can understand the ominous sound of the upcoming threat. He asks his mother a question in the book:

Are you going to open it? It sounds as if they might break it down. (ibid., 4)

Meanwhile Jonas does not utter a word in the film, his fear is shown in his countenance: his eyes are filled with many questions. When Elena is walking to open the door, we can see his image shrunk out of fear.

The image of rifles is shown through the film but the act of shooting cannot be often heard. This choice in screen adaptation intensifies traumatic experience whenever the sound of shooting is heard. The rifle becomes one of the symbols of injurious reality in screen adaptation. The first time we see the rifle is while Lina is on the way to the shop for food. She is startled by the rifle on the soldier's shoulder. The view of the street is shown from above, with the shoulder of a giant monument to Stalin obscuring the view. The first shooting sound is heard at the train station and it causes panic among people despite the fact that none has seen the action. We may assume that people are not used to this sound and, since they have no information about what is happening, they might think they are taken to that place to be shot. The camera shows the close up faces of petrified running, shouting people, who try to protect themselves with bare hands.

From the beginning of the journey to the exile, Lina starts drawing the map with the hope to send it to her father to let him know where he should come and save the family.

Ruta Sepetys describes the protagonist of the novel, Lina, as the one who does not have any paper to draw on; however, she finds the way to express herself and calm down:

I used my fingers to sketch the image in a layer of dirt on the floor near the front of the train car, wiping the drawings away and starting over, again and again. (ibid., 35)

I had to surrender my dirt canvas on the floor and instead used my fingernail to carve drawings on the wall. (ibid., 37)

I wiped my tears with my handkerchief and allowed others to do the same. When it was handed back to me, I paused, staring at it. Unlike paper, the handkerchief could travel hand to hand without deteriorating. I would use it to draw on for Papa. (ibid., 62)

Meanwhile her emotional outbreak and her personal trauma are vividly revealed in the film. They are shown via her drawings on paper. In the episode when she is forced to draw commander Komorov, Lina cannot concentrate and stifle her emotions. In reply to the commander's laughter, when he sees his face drawn as if he was the devil, she says that she draws what she sees. We can spot several traumatic events leading to this outbreak. The first encounter with commander Komorov is in the episode of

shooting Ona who is looking for her dead baby. He pretends to help the suffering young woman to search for her baby and then takes his gun and kills her in front of the crowd of people who are shocked by such inhuman behaviour. Lina's feelings are shown in close up shots. Before the shooting, we see her face with multiple emotions on it. She is astonished and shocked, still, Lina cannot believe what she saw and looks back again to check if her eyes, seeing the scene of shooting, and ears, hearing the sound of the gun, do not lie to her. Lina does not utter any sound though shouting can be heard around as people start panicking in fear to be killed too. In the last shot of this episode, we see how traumatic the scene is and how her mother's embrace soothes the feeling of fear.

One of the episodes of collective trauma is seen when all deportees are announced to be guilty and, instead of being killed, they are condemned to forced labour for all their life in **the** lagers of the Krasnoyarsk Krai, unless they sign the confession they are guilty and spend twenty-five years in exile working for food.

The exiled are woken up at night "for paper work" as Lina puts it in the book:

They packed us into the main room of the log building. (ibid., 140)

In screen adaptation the people are portrayed in full size shots with their heads and eyes down, as they have already got accustomed to the new way of behaving in front of the brutal commanders. Only some of the deportees reshaped their thinking and agree to sign the document at once. In the close-up shot we see Elena and Lina who already know that it is safer not to look into the eyes of the commander. Although Elena is still not broken, she encourages others not to sign the confession, since they are not guilty and have nothing to divulge. The commander does not lose his temper, he never does, but punishes the people forcing them to stand without sleep through the night.

Taking into consideration internal and external focalizers in the film, the combination of both internal and external focalization can be observed via flashbacks in the movie.

Moreover, when it comes to translation for dubbing, the translation is adjusted throughout the process to meet requirements such as isochrony, lip sync, and other constraints.<sup>1</sup> In addition, not all audio+verbal information is dubbed into Lithuanian and the Russian language is neither dubbed nor subtitled. This could have been the adapter's choice to make it sound more authentic, even though it might be difficult to understand for the audience who do not speak Russian what is happening on the screen.

In the majority of the cases in dubbing, the strategy of free translation was employed, aiming for lip synchrony in close-ups. An example of unnatural dialogue is observed when Lina recalls a sunny afternoon by the sea, when she took her friend's clothes and ran away:

ST (EN) Lina: Have fun explaining where your clothes went.

TT (LT) Lina: O tu neliūdek, kad dingo drabužiai. (verbatim: And do not be sad that your clothes are gone.)

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Miggiani 2023, Chaume 2013, Matamala 2011.

Audio+non-verbal information, such as background music, shooting sounds, cries, coughing etc., is left in the dubbed version unchanged.

Visual+non-verbal information, such as Soviet symbols is not explained to the audience neither in dubbing, nor in subtitles. Using Frederic Chaume's formulation, this translator's choice allows the audience to decode the information relying on their own knowledge.

Visual+verbal information, such as the names of the train stations, is not translated either and cannot be read by the viewers who do not know Russian. This is the reason why they cannot follow the route to exile. Meanwhile, Andrius's notes in English, which he left for Lina in her book, are rendered in the Lithuanian dubbing. In the latter episode, the letter of Lina's acceptance to Art school is in English and not translated either, thus, Lina's facial expression becomes the focal point and the key to the message.

Overall, the audience have to know all three languages heard or seen in the film, as well as be acquainted with the period of Stalin's repressions, otherwise it might be difficult to grasp the meaning of certain episodes.

In the final episode of the movie, the point of convergence, offered by the director and the screenplay writer of the film is when we see Lina and Jonas leaving the island for home.

The author of the novel does not dwell on the image featuring the return home. Nevertheless, these lines imply hope:

I left the jurta to chop wood. I began my walk through the snow, five kilometers to the tree line. That's when I saw it. A tiny sliver of gold appeared between shades of gray on the horizon. I stared at the amber band of sunlight, smiling. The sun had returned. (ibid., 336)

In the first high shot of the movie Lina and Jonas are shown still as small targets in an unfriendly environment who struggle for survival. The high shot is followed by a medium shot which brings hope to these two small figures: we can see the ship in front of them and can guess that a long journey home will begin. In the close up shot a different feelings are shown. We cannot see either happiness or smiling faces as they are leaving their mother's grave and can rely only on themselves. They depart without hesitation feeling their mother watching them from above, with their grandmother leading them home.

## **6. Conclusion**

Literature analysis on the topic of trauma theory and studies, as well as its reflections in literature and cinema, suggests that hidden traumatic wounds are better shown and understood through images and sounds.

Genette's three types of focalization, - zero, internal and external, - as well as the visible and invisible narrator in the story, offer a new approach to the study of audiovisual translation from the perspective of screen adaptation according to the external and internal position of the focalizer in the narrative: perceptual, psychological and ideological.

The examples of personal traumas, selected from the film “Ashes in the Snow” (2018), reveal that the characters suffered their long-lasting traumas in different ways. All sufferings and emotions are shown in close-up shots, more often through non-verbal channels. The upper camera position is used to bring to light the vulnerability and unimportance of heroes, while the lower camera angle is chosen to underscore the superiority of the Soviet regime and the officers over the deportees. The episodes of collective trauma were chosen to demonstrate that close-up shots reveal the feelings and emotions of the people living through collective trauma.

Personal trauma is reflected through drawings, close-up facial expressions, alienating behaviour (talkative – silent), repetitive behaviour (looking at the photos in the medallion). While collective trauma is shown through cooperation, support and traditions.

Aural focalization occurs through the Russian language, the sounds of the train, the sounds of shooting and the sounds of crying.

Flashbacks give painful contrast between bright past and dull present. Careless laughing, the warm sea, family and friends help to unearth the unspeakable situation pertaining to the family in exile.

The research showed that non-verbal information is effectively conveyed by a certain composition, camera angle, and focus, light, colours. Flashbacks, music, background sounds are used to help the audience to understand the inner states of the characters.

Overall, the audience have to know all three languages heard or seen in the film, as well as be acquainted with the period of Stalin’s repressions, otherwise it might be difficult to grasp the meaning of certain episodes.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

**Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.