Translating fear into reality, from a Semiotic perspective – A short story, a film and a village: the case of Sleepy Hollow

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Reference

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According to Greimas, to speak of meaning is both to translate and to produce signification: thus, translatability is one of the fundamental properties of semiotic systems, it comes in between the existential judgment “there is meaning” and the possibility of saying something about it. In fact natural languages are granted a privileged status with respect to the other semiotic systems since they can be used as languages into which all other semiotic systems (such as painting, music, etc.) may be translated and because, as natural languages are translated into each other, they also provide the necessary material for the metalinguistic constructions that allow them to speak of themselves (paraphrase). This have led to the hypostatization of natural languages and to the affirmation that the world and, say, music are understood as signifying only inasmuch as they can be verbalized; in other words, other semiotic systems are but pure signifiers for the signifieds provided by natural languages. Greimas warns that this acknowledgement of the privileged status of natural languages does not authorize their reification as loci of the constructed meaning: signification is first an activity (or an operation of translation) before being the result of this activity.

In this view, Greimas provides us with a broad definition of translation:

It is in its role as semiotic activity that translation may be broken down into a doing interpretative of the ab quo text and a doing productive of the ad quem text. By differentiating between these two phases, it is possible to understand how the interpretation of the ab quo text (or the implicit or explicit analysis of this text) can lead either to the construction of a metalanguage that attempts to account for it, or to the production (in the literal sense of this term) of the ad quem text that is more or less equivalent, due to the non-adequation of the two figurative universes, to the first. (Greimas & Courtés 1979/1982 : 352)

I will use this definition as a basis to study translation of the “Sleepy Hollow phenomenon”: this case study provides with different interpretative stages of the alleged source text "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by the American writer Washington Irving. Particularly I will look into this phenomenon by analysing the construction of its meaning via the translation of the short story into i) the silent film The Headless Horseman directed by Venturini, ii) the movie Sleepy Hollow directed by Burton and iii) the tv series Sleepy Hollow, released by Fox Broadcasting Company. References will be made to the American village of Sleepy Hollow in the state of New York, which is to be seen as the spatial translation of Irving’s short story.

Bibliography