

Carmen Dominte*

THE LEITMOTIF OF DEATH: FROM TEXT AND MUSIC TO FILM

Keywords: *death; leitmotif; text; music; adaptation*

Abstract: *Considering death as a leitmotif may be the core element that could create an inter-semiotic connection between literature, music and cinematography. Analysed in these three sign systems (textual, musical and cinematic) the leitmotif of death reveals its artistic specificity but transposed from the narrative or/and musical medium into the cinematic one, it needs to be adapted to the new artistic conventions and signs. It is the case of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and Gustav Mahler's *Fifth Symphony* when appropriated for Luchino Visconti's film – *Death in Venice*. The study intends to explore the means of adapting the textual and musical leitmotif of death to the cinematographic medium in order to understand this artistic phenomenon as an act of (re)generation regarded from the interrelated perspectives of artistic production, based on an extensive process of trans-coding, of creation, involving both the stage of (re)interpretation and (re)creation and of perception, experienced as an inter-textual and inter-semiotic engagement.*

General Reflections upon Adaptation

Most of the recent theories regarding this field describe adaptation as the process of presenting a literary text on film. What is to be presented is actually the fictional world generated by the narrative text. Any literary text establishes a new actual world that imposes its own laws of existence, together with its own model of possibilities. In this sense, the fictional world may be considered as an autonomous one¹ (Pavel 175). It may also be regarded as the site of multiple possible storylines which will be developed not only in the process of reception but also in the process of adaptation. In fact, in this respect, to adapt means to adjust, to alter, to make suitable. Thus, one fictional world contains all the emerging possibilities of further development either it is the case of a mental construct, as in the process of reception, or it is the case of an autonomous work as in the process of transfictionality or adaptation². Such a work functions as a *text in the second degree* meaning a text created and then received in relation to a prior text (Genette 5). Being aesthetic objects in their own right, adaptations need to be treated as a plural stereophony of echoes, citations and references (Barthes 160).

The whole process of adaptation is one in which the stock formal devices of the narrative, mainly the point of view, voice, focalization, tense, metaphor are to be realized by other means (Whelehan 9). In order to fulfil this process, it is necessary to make a critical distinction between those narrative features that can be transferred

* National University of Music in Bucharest, Romania.

¹ It would be naïve to reduce fictional worlds to mere representations of the actual world.

² Adaptation itself involves the process of reception using it in a further process of (re)creation.

from one medium to another and those features which cannot. Using Barthes's structural ordering principle by which the basic features of all narrative could be classified, McFarlane considers that all the segments of the narrative can be broken into smaller units – the *form* and the *content*, which are further divided into *distributional units* (the action, the causes and the effects) and *indices* (the roles of characters, the psychological states, the descriptions of locations and so on) (McFarlane 13-14). In their turn, distributional functions contain cardinal functions or *nuclei* which denote all those actions that generate direct consequences in the development of the story and *catalysers* that are meant to fill in between key narrative events. While a nucleus³ is impossible to be extracted from the story without altering it completely, the catalyser is used to accelerate, to anticipate, to delay or to lead astray the story. To some extent, the distributional functions could be easily transferred from one medium to another mainly because they denote story content. (15) On the other hand, indices include all those means by which character information, location, general atmosphere are presented and their depiction needs different means of representation. That is why adaptation may be regarded as an interpretation or as a re-reading of a previous work of art. This act of reinterpretation applied on the indices generated by a narrative text will certainly involve the movement into a new generic mode or context provided by the cinematic medium (Sanders 2). Although adaptation functions as a derivation it is not a derivative work. It is a work that is second without being secondary. In other words, it is its own palimpsest. Because adaptation connects two different artistic media, functioning as a re-mediation between these two ways of artistic representation it may also be regarded as an act of translation in the form of inter-semiotic transposition from one sign system (the literary medium) to another (the cinematic medium). This certainly is translation but in a very specific sense, as a transmutation or trans-coding, that is a recording into a new system of conventions and laws as well as signs (Hutcheon 8). Generally speaking, when referring to the act of trans-coding it should be mentioned the fact that this process may involve a shift of medium (from a narrative text into a film – the case of adaptation) or genre (an epic into a novel) or a change of frame and therefore context.⁴ At the same time, transposition could mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama. (7). When it is regarded only as an act of reception, adaptation can be considered a form of intertextuality mainly because it is experienced as palimpsest based on the receivers' memory of other works, artistic or not, that resonate through repetition with variation. Needless to say, adaptation is more than that. It is always an act of creation too, revealing itself as an artistic entity. It always involves not only the process of (re)interpretation but also the process of (re)creation. Considering these perspectives upon adaptation, the study aims to explore the means of adapting the textual and musical leitmotif of death to the cinematic medium in order to understand adaptation as an act of (re)generation.

³ In most cases, adaptations seek to preserve the nucleus of a story otherwise they are no longer adaptations.

⁴ Telling the same story from a different perspective may create a different interpretation.

Adaptation as an Act of Transmedial Regeneration

Taking into account the fact that adaptation could be referred to both as an aesthetic product in its own right and as a process of reception and (re)creation, leading a prior work to further artistic development it could also be regarded as an act of regeneration. In this case, it functions in a similar way to any act of transfictionality, not linking the fictional worlds belonging to two different literary texts but connecting two different semiotic systems. The relationships which may be established between the two artistic media are *expansion, modification and transposition*, each of them behaving as artistic operations involved in the process of (re)creation (Doležel 206).

Functioning as a possibility of enlarging the original fictional world, expansion⁵ adds more elements either of narrative reasons or of cinematic reasons or both. Elements belonging to the narrative medium, such as new events or new characters, as well as elements belonging to the cinematographic medium among which there can be mentioned music, sound design, voice over, movement, visual perspective and so on are meant to enlarge the original fictional world as it can be noticed in figure 1.

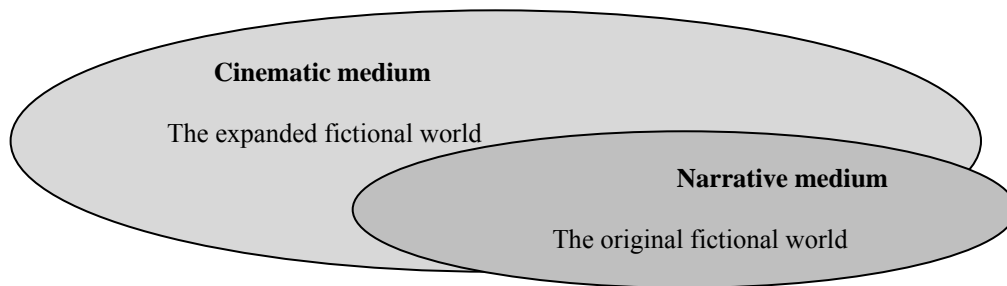


Fig. 1

During the process of adaptation, modification is another fundamental operation that can be used. According to Doležel, from the narrative perspective only, new different versions of the proto-world are constructed redesigning the original structure and reinventing the story more or less (207). Most of the times, the counterfactual sequence of the plot is followed as expected, but through

⁵ When referring to adaptation, the main function of expansion is to add new cinematographic elements to the original fictional world and thus expanding it into another artistic medium. From the narrative perspective, in a case of adaptation, expansion may add only few elements which do not generate another literary fictional world because this may provide another work of art that would be adapted in another cinematographic product. It is not the same situation as in literature where each character is a source of expansion developing new plots, where time is prolonged covering the original fictional world through sequels or/and prequels. The cinematographic products have their own possibilities of further development but they belong to the same medium and they are not subjects of adaptation.

modification⁶ the destiny of the characters may be changed. From the cinematographic perspective, modification is much more involved in the process of adaptation. Sometimes the end of the story is changed, as in the adaptations of Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but other times only the general pattern of the original fictional world is preserved as in the adaptations of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

In the case of transposition⁷, the design and the plot of the original fictional world are preserved but the changes are illustrated through different temporal periods or spatial settings. Besides these changes, the plot is adapted to fit the new environment while the structure remains mostly the same (206). Whenever transposition is preferred for expanding an original fictional world and its story into another one, modification is also used in order to sustain it. Transposition without modification is very rare⁸ in both media, narrative and cinematic. Thus, both fundamental operations (modification and transposition) take the original fictional world as the core element for new possibilities of development. The same core element functions as the site of multiple possible storylines which are to spring from it, as noticed in figure 2.

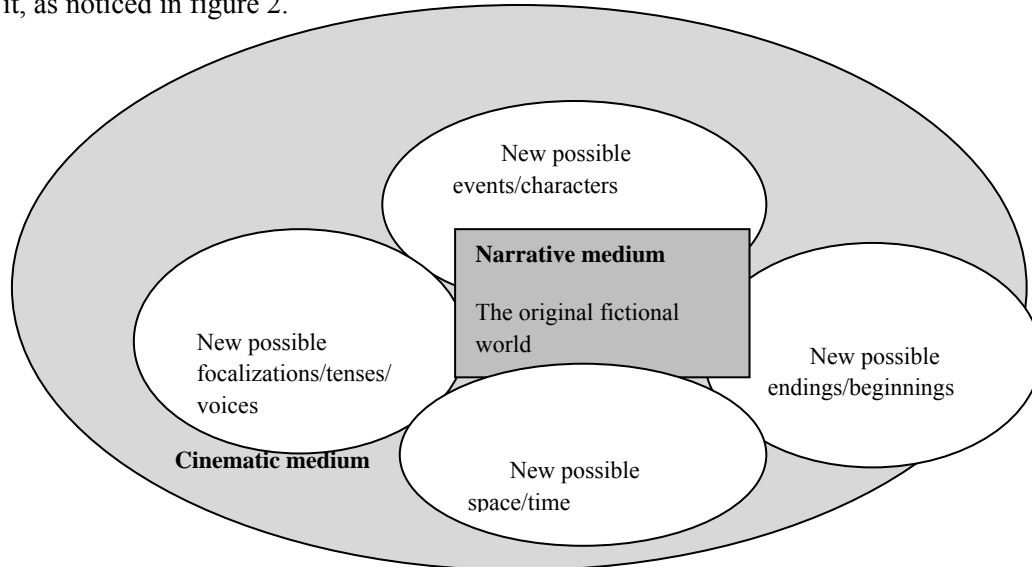


Fig. 2

⁶ One of the best narrative examples is given by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986). The main character of both texts, Robinson in the second version does not engage in any of the heroic feasts as in the original story and he neither keeps a journal.

⁷ In the case of narrative transposition, a good example is provided by Ulrich Plenzdorf's *The New Sufferings of Young Werther* which transplants the original plot of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* into the German Democratic Republic of the 70's. Opposed to the original story, the main character of the second version does not commit suicide but dies in an accident.

⁸ A genuine case of modification could be illustrated by the case of staging the Greek tragedies in modern costumes.

In most cases of adaptation, one of the three transmedial operations is used and sometimes there could be a mixture of two or even all of them. Each time there is at least one element that is expanded, modified or transposed. It may be the ending and/or the beginning of the original story. It may be the area and/or the time, the focalization, the voices, the tenses, some events and/or characters. Because expansion does not require changing any of the basic facts asserted in the original fictional world, it represents a more preserving operation than modification and transposition (Ryan 367). The relationship that the last two operations bear to the original fictional world is that of overlap, while expansion refers to related but, at the same time, different worlds. All the three operations are destined to adapt a fictional world to a new system of artistic representation. The whole process of adaptation presupposes further artistic development of the original fictional world which thus will become an expanded or a modified and/or transposed fictional world. Whatever the operation is used, the act of adaptation implies transmedial regeneration of the original fictional world.

The Leitmotif of Death as a Core Element of Adaptation

Generally speaking, leitmotif⁹ means a leading or guiding motif used in a literary or musical piece in order to generate special effects given by its repetitive aspect. Being associated with specific musical or narrative themes, leitmotifs help to convey a story's underlying message through repeated metaphorical representation, to develop other aspects of the narrative and to build on elements of plot, character and setting. Most of the times, the effect is to intensify.

When referring to adaptation, leitmotif may become one of the elements that are able to connect the two distinct artistic media, the literary and the cinematographic. It may function as an element of expansion, modification or transposition. The following analysis aims to explore the means of adapting the textual leitmotif of death as used in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* to the homonymous cinematographic representation.

The film *Death in Venice* directed by Luchino Visconti and launched in 1971 represents a perfect case of adaptation which transposes the essence of a complicated narrative story into the cinematic medium. The original fictional world is modified so that it can fit Visconti's vision. All the leitmotifs¹⁰ used by Mann in the narrative version are (re)created so that they may add new artistic connotations. Most of the times, a narrative leitmotif is not only transposed into the cinematic medium but it is also modified and then used extensively in more different situations than in the narrative story and thus emphasizing the effect. For example, the colour red is used by Mann in connection with death but Visconti turns it into orange and

⁹ Leitmotif was originally a German term used for a short constantly recurring musical phrase.

¹⁰ Thomas Mann usually adopted the leitmotif to refer to individual elements of a story in order to contribute to the overall telling of the tale, as the leitmotifs from family register in *Buddenbrooks* or the leitmotif of a pencil in *Der Zauberberg* or the leitmotif of a poisonous butterfly, Hetaera Esmeralda, used for an infected prostitute, for the sensual temptation and for the pact with the devil in *Doktor Faustus*.

associates it to several other things impregnating them with the connotation of death. It first appears in a shot of an elderly fop whose hair, tie, lips and cheeks are of this colour. Later, it is enhanced by its surroundings. For instance, on the terrace of the hotel there is a fruit stand with oranges, the colour reappears in the lobby of the hotel where several of the ornate lamp shades are orange and some of the ladies' hats have orange highlights, emphasizing the effect. Orange is also used in the breakfast scene where many people are drinking something similar to orange juice. At the train station, in the departure scene, the guards have orange fezzes whose colour dominates the setting which is mostly black, white and sepia. Orange also appears in the flashbacks, as in the scene of the storm in which Aschenbach's wife is wearing a bright orange blouse. Orange becomes a leitmotif that is used in details too: the towel that the governess dries Tadzio off with is white with an orange border, the orange offered by the governess to Tadzio and so on. Other colours modified by Visconti in this film are black and white. In the narrative version the colours are mentioned separately, black being related to death but in the cinematic version these colours are brought together highlighting the complex relationship between them. For example in the moment when the ship pulls in at the beginning of the film, the smoke from the ship is first black but when the whistle blows the smoke it becomes white and spreads against the black of the smoke stack. Another scene that uses the association between black and white as leitmotif of death is the one of the health inspector's boat approaching the shore. The boat is black having a white circle bisected by a black cross. Besides, the two men on the same boat are dressed in black and one of them is wearing a white suit. Even the gondolier is dressed in black and white. In Mann's narrative version Aschenbach remarks that the gondolas are black and coffin-like. In the film the image of Aschenbach's black suitcase is added to those from the text. The cinematic version goes even further with the usage of black and white, mixing them into grey which may be noticed in all the scenes where there is smoke, steam or fog.

In the narrative version there are particular elements that function as leitmotifs of death among which the boat, the gondolas, the corpses, the black cloth of the camera. The inclusion of the camera is not only Visconti's invention. Mann uses this element too but not so often. At the end of the text, he describes an abandoned camera on the beach: "A camera with no photographer to operate it stood on its tripod at the edge of the sea, a black cloth that covered it fluttering with a snapping noise in the wind that now blew colder." (61) In the cinematic version, camera is used in most of the beach scenes, being associated with different other elements, such as the strawberries, or not. In the scene of Aschenbach on a walkway, quite a distance away, there is a camera on a tripod. In other scene, Tadzio walks behind the camera as a man is taking a photograph. Later, after a strawberry seller walks away, Tadzio passes directly in front of the camera. After more scenes on the beach, there is one in which Tadzio runs away and the governess falls as she tries to catch him while the camera man walks by the right in front of them carrying his camera. The final scene of the film ends with the abandoned camera on the beach.

The passage of time is another leitmotif associated with death suggested by the presence of watches, clocks and hourglasses. Although there is a brief mention of an hourglass in the narrative version, the film abounds in using it. Sometimes the

hourglass is placed on the table but sometimes it is included in the setting. In the scene when Aschenbach follows Tazio to St. Mark's, he stands in front of a balustrade made up of rungs in the shape of hourglasses. In fact, each time, Aschenbach is in the St. Mark's Square the bells are ringing while the angle of the shot enlarges so that it includes the hourglass motif in the office of the travel agent.

Besides the leitmotifs already mentioned, there are others with a more subtle usage. Analyzing the death figures¹¹ that appear in the film it may be noticed that they do not seem to have the same powerful influence on the main character, Aschenbach, as in the narrative version. For example, the strolling singer is more a disturbing presence than a messenger of death. The musicians in the gondola and the street have only a momentary impact on Aschenbach. He perceives them but makes no connection between them and death. The only figure who interacts with him is the gondolier in the moment of approaching Venice by sea. All these figures are yet important because their repetitive presence is meant to create an impact on the audience, prefiguring what is to happen.

There are also leitmotifs associated with music. First of all it is Tazio's name which sounds like a musical description – *adagio*¹². In the narrative version it is the narrator who sets the tone for the reader's perception and understanding of Aschenbach but in the film the narrator's part is replaced by music. Taken from Mahler's *Symphony No. 5*¹³, *Adagietto* functions as a central element in all the scenes it is used. In the symphony, *Adagietto* represents a pivotal moment functioning as a slow introduction to the epic rondo, the finale that ends the symphony joining seamlessly together the two movements. Composed in c sharp minor, *Adagietto* is destined to mark melodically the scenes in which it is used. In Visconti's film, this musical part is not only associated to the passages by which characters and situations were identified, as in most Hollywood productions, but it becomes an icon of death (Duncan 38). The structure of *Adagietto* may be described as follows: A A B C A B, in which each letter is used for a melodic section. Never being repeated, the C section represents the most dramatic part and functions as a climax. In fact the whole editing of the film is made around this particular section. In the sequences in which *Adagietto* occurs the orchestral version is used as non-diegetic music¹⁴ emphasizing the emotional tension. First it is heard in the establishing shot during the opening sequence. The camera moves from the general perspective of a ship on the water to the deck of the ship, continuing to close the angle till it reaches a man who attempts to read a book. As the sequence progresses the music reflects the mood of the character, being characterized as meditative and introspective. The music ends abruptly, before finishing the C section, just in the moment when the man in the chair gazes off with a melancholic and wistful expression in his eyes.

¹¹ The most important figure of death in the narrative version is the traveller but he does not appear in the film.

¹² In the field of music, *adagio* means slowly.

¹³ Using Mahler's music in the film is appropriate given the fact that Mann's main character has Mahler's first name and physical description. Besides, Visconti takes this connection further turning Aschenbach into a famous composer.

¹⁴ The non-diegetic music represents the source of the music which is not a part of the on-screen fictional world.

Adagietto occurs a second time in the sequence in which Aschenbach attempts to leave Venice. The section begins with Aschenbach leaving the dining room. At the entrance he meets Tadzio making his farewell to him. On the boat heading the train station Aschenbach is experiencing tremendous grief. The sequence lasts for ninety seconds with no dialogue to express the character's emotional state but only with the music of the A section. At the station, Aschenbach discovers that his luggage was sent to a wrong destination and thus giving him the opportunity to stay. As he is heading back to Venice the music covers the B section. While the sun comes out, the music reaches the C section but not ending it.

For a third time *Adagietto* is used in a flashback sequence where Aschenbach is crying at the funeral procession of his daughter few years earlier. There is a jump cut to another scene in which Aschenbach sits in a barber's chair. The B section begins while the barber is putting makeup on him and ends only few second later when the scene cuts to Aschenbach in Venice where he walks keeping his head down in order to avoid detection from Tadzio and his family. As the C section starts, Tadzio glances back and sees him. The section closes to the end when Aschenbach has lost track of them and begins to cry but the final measures are not heard because another jump cut to a flashback is inserted.

The fourth and last time when *Adagietto* occurs is near the end of the film. The sequence starts with Aschenbach in a chair watching Tadzio and his friend Jaschiu playing on the beach. The A section is used while Tadzio is walking into the sea. As the music flows into the B section Tadzio stops and looks over his shoulder toward Aschenbach. The B section develops to its climax and covers Aschenbach's last attempt to rise from his chair and follow Tadzio but slumps back losing his consciousness. It is the moment when the music reaches the C section. The sequence shows the cabana boy rushing to Aschenbach's aid, the woman on the beach turning and stopping the children from coming any closer and ends with Aschenbach being carried away. The music continues with the C section while the credits are rolling and the screen fades to black but not even in the last instance of the film *Adagietto* does not come to its completion.

In all the sequences Visconti uses Mahler's *Adagietto* it is to conjure conflicting emotional states, changing the function of such a music from a soundtrack to a narrator that musically renders the characters' feelings and comments upon their actions.

The repetitive function of the leitmotif of death in the textual version is meant to highlight the tension of the reader's expectations. Transposing most of Mann's elements of the leitmotif into the cinematic version, Visconti modifies them and adds the musical leitmotifs in order to emphasize this tension. He interconnects the textual leitmotifs with the musical ones reinterpreting them in relation to his own creation made according to his expressive needs and artistic concerns. He modifies and transposes the leitmotifs of death from the narrative medium into the cinematic medium adapting them to the audiovisual representation.

The whole narrative fictional world is (re)created by other means which are specific to the new medium. The narrative becomes image¹⁵ and sound flowing toward the final scene. The whole flow contains the elements that function as leitmotifs either they come from the textual version such as the colours, the boat, the gondola, the corpses, the camera, the death figures or they come from the musical medium among which the most important one is Mahler's *Adagio*. Adapted to the new medium of artistic representation the leitmotifs of death, textual and musical, expand the narrative text into another work of art, regenerating the original one. Thus the leitmotif of death becomes the core element, among many others, that helps the process of transmedial regeneration as it may be seen in figure 3.

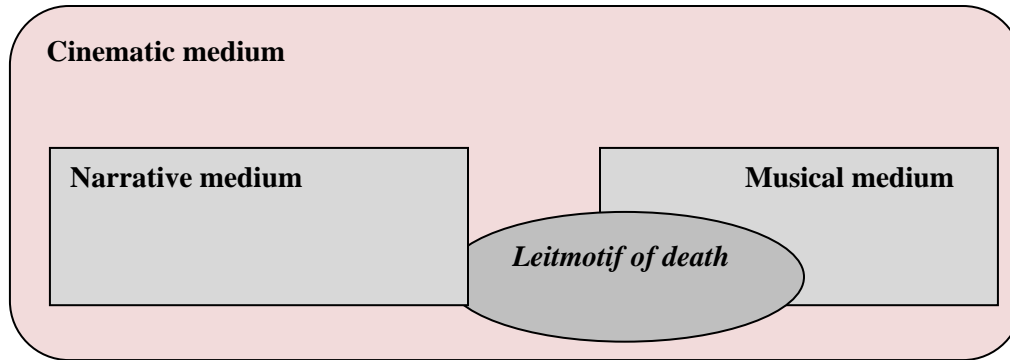


Fig. 3

Conclusion

Regarding the leitmotif of death as the core element of adaptation provides new insights into this specific field. Besides the fact that it interconnects three different media, it also becomes an important means of expansion, modification and/or transposition creating the possibility of transmedial regeneration of the original work of art. Although it can be identified in a literary text, in a piece of music or in a film, the leitmotif of death is always (re)interpreted for the specific medium it is destined to function. Sometimes it is extended, as the leitmotif of the coffin extended in many other elements such as the gondolas, the boat and the black suitcase. Sometimes it is modified, as the usage of colour orange and grey created from the original colours that were referred to in the text. Other times it is transposed, as the leitmotif of the musical fragment, *Adagio*, which is thus adapted to specific cinematic sequences so that it may emphasize the original tension found in the textual version. Containing all these (re)created elements, the cinematic version¹⁶ of the textual *Death in Venice* is a much nuanced version relying on

¹⁵ According to Henry Bacon, the power of the cinematic image is to convey information about the diegetic world (the fictional world belonging to the film) without having to halt the narrative flow. (Bacon 9)

¹⁶ Usually, adaptations typically simplify the plot structure of a narrative text and get only the basic story line. In *Death in Venice*, even if it is a case of adaptation, Visconti creates an independent aesthetic work of art.

images and music and, at the same time, reflecting a deep understanding of Mann's literary creation¹⁷ and Mahler's composition.

As an act of transmedial regeneration, adaptation will always function as a double process of (re)interpretation and (re)creation. It will always be considered a creative and an interpretative artistic act. Leitmotifs represent a means of extending the inter-textual engagement of the original version with the adapted work. Being involved not only in the act of trans-coding but also in the act of re-coding from the narrative and musical code into the cinematic code, leitmotifs are adapted to each new sign system using the specific ways of artistic representation. Moreover, leitmotifs are core elements deeply involved in the process of transfictional transposition experienced as an inter-textual and inter-semiotic engagement.

Works Cited

- Bacon, Henry. *Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Ed. and Trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press/Collins, 1977. Print.
- Doležel, Lubomir. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998. Print.
- Duncan, Dean. *Charms that Soothe: Classical Music and the Narrative Film*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Seuil, 1982. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*, London: Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Mann, Thomas. *Death in Venice*. Trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter, New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- McFarlane, B. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Print.
- Pavel, Thomas. "Possible Worlds in Literary Semantics." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1975): 165-176. Print.
- Ryan, Marie Laure. "Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality." *Poetics Today* 3 (2013): 361-388. Print.
- Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Welehan, Imelda. "Adaptations: The Contemporary Dilemmas." *Adaptations – From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. Eds. Deborah Cartwell and Imelda Welehan. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

¹⁷ It is commonly known that Visconti uses many elements taken from other texts written by Mann, mainly from *Doktor Faustus*.