

Spectrality and its Translatability: Filmic Adaptation and the Narrative of the Leftover Space

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Abstract:

Translating a verbal text into a filmic one may serve the purpose to highlight and foreground the conditions in the original text by bringing to it more substantial experiences through spatial and temporal articulations. In this paper, the relationship between an original and its translation is explored as to demonstrate that the translation is a fusion of the ambiguous resemblance and the unstable dissemblance of the original through interconnecting forces operating behind the construction of images, manifesting, what Walter Benjamin terms, coextensivity between the image and the script, the visual and the verbal. This is particularly viable when applying on filmic translations of horror stories, especially ghost narratives, as the audience is seeing the not seen which is, borrowing from Sontag, “not a ghost, but a ‘ghost.’” The discussion also focuses on the connection between Hong Kong as a city in the text and the visualized spaces of spectrality in the adaptation.

Keywords: Adaptation, Spectrality, Leftover Space

The aim of this study is to discuss the filmic adaptation of a horror story in which the idea of spectrality engaged in the process of rendition from page to screen is focused as spectrality is an implicit manifestation of translation. To begin with, the affinity between spectrality and translation will be drawn as to highlight the significant role of temporality whereas visualizing it can be considered an expansion. The ocular experience of spectrality of the viewing subject is spaced and placed, bonding inextricably to the mental and symbolic spaces unfolding a place. This inevitably makes the study of the filmic adaptation of a narrative of leftover space haunting everyday Hong Kong an inquiry into the relation between space and translation.

Though intrinsically different they are when referred to, the term spectrality, as relating to translation, seemingly prompts a revelation of subtle affinity between it and “afterlife,” the essence of Benjamin’s concept of translation. The analogy goes beyond the literal meaning to invoke a mashup of absence and presence with obscurity at its core. Pertaining to the concepts is an inextricable phantomatic existence of an original, which always exists elsewhere yet lurks in the background as if it were coterminous with its successor despite of the fact that it can be understood as the prior, exemplar of temporal fixation, and has disappeared. The original is sited and placed at a point of time, and thus is historical. The interconnectedness of the two is further substantiated by Benjamin in the process of conceptualizing life and afterlife in which he highlights that neither “organic corporeality” nor “the feeble spectre of the soul” can exert full dominion over the definition of life.

History is the essential determinant in this (Benjamin, 1923/2004, pp. 76-77) whereas, the tangible and intangible materials are necessarily the attributes of temporality, an essence of life. The original, in Benjamin’s sense (1923/2004), is a disintegrated vessel while a translation is contemplated as a regeneration of this prior by affixing the fragments together (pp. 80-81). It exists as an allegory which holds onto ruins taking the form of the prior knowledge understood as historical inscriptions and is mandatory in the construction of the translation described as afterlife. If this afterlife is a transformation of disruption into continuity, a recurrence of a chronological prior, then, it can be aptly described as a spectre – a deceased body continued, transfigured and returned, the presence of an absence. This suggests, first, that the articulation of multiple temporalities is essential in the eluci-

dation of spectrality and its translation. Second, behind this idea, clearly lies another that of creativity involving the process of materializing the temporality especially with filmic adaptation that entails Sanders' idea of an expansion as noted in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Sanders, 2016, p. 11). This becomes the frame for discussion of the filmic adaptation and theorization here.

This expansion, or a change, prompts one to perceive adaptation not as identical to the original, whereby it is apt to use "kinship," a term adopted by Benjamin, to depict the linkage between the original and its adaptation that it "does not necessarily involve likeness" (Benjamin, 1923/2004, p. 78). Though tagged with the questionable concept of replication, adaptation has transcended far beyond such a discourse to incorporate this idea of expansion, resonating Andreas' observation that the purpose of adaptation is "but expansion rather than contraction" (1999, p. 107). Then, a filmic adaptation of spectrality is an obvious expansion associated with the realm of the ocular experience. Implied in this is a spatial discourse connecting the text to the materiality beyond the screen where place, space and time are conditioned because "vision is social and historical" (Foster, 1988, p. ix). A translator has to take into account, as to pursue the factors governing "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein" (Foster, 1988, p. ix). Viewer or the experiencing subject, predominates. It is this aspect of seeing that further connects this exploration to the concept of spectrality described by multiple temporal dimensions unfolding in the haunted place. A filmic adaptation of a Hong Kong horror story directed by a local director Fruit Chan will be examined as to illustrate the importance of such in the rendition of the narrative of a spectre with its translatability understood as "a specific significance inherent in the original" (Benjamin, 1923/2004, p. 76).

The inextricable connection among technology, the generation of spectre and optical illusion and the post-Enlightenment rationality manifested in the public entertainment and embedded in Benjamin's phantasmagoria is now explained as "the phantasmic imagery of the mind," a simpler reference, and in Terry Castle's remarks, is "spectralization" or "ghostifying" of mental space (1995, pp. 141-3). This becomes simply, in the words of Andreotti and Lahiji (2017), "the way thought absorb ghosts" (p. 31) that inevitably denotes a spectral subjectivity resonating Derrida's formulation of the spectre, which is the invisible visible (2002, p. 115). It "is not simply

someone we see coming back, it is something by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed ... in so far as the other is watching only us, concerns only us ... without even being able to meet its gaze" (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002, p. 122). This is an experiencing subject, perceiving the cinematic object and is constructed in the representation, and whose existence necessitates attention on communal imaginaries marking the significance of the lived experience and the spatial practices, territorializing spaces into places for the haunting to take place. The significance of the place is further consolidated by Jameson (1992) who remarks that ghost stories show a "contingent and constitutive dependence of physical place," (p. 90). There must be a place for the never dying ghost to haunt, "for it to come and to come back" (Derrida, 1994, p. 123). This place, in Fisher's (2007) investigation of space and spectrality, is constructed by space which is "intrinsic to spectrality, as one of the meanings of the term 'haunt' – a place – indicates. Yet haunting, evidently, is a disorder of time as well as of space. Haunting happens when a space is invaded or otherwise disrupted by a time that is out-of-joint, a dyschromia" (p. 1). Then, the translatability of spectrality is articulated by the concepts of space and place, which prevail in the rendition, and it is the translator's task to realize it on screen with what Lynch (1960) in "The Image of the City" terms "imageability." He defines it as "the quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a very strong image in any given observer" (p. 9). Ultimately, spacing is a prerequisite in the construction of the place in where the viewer sees a space and anticipates what could happen.

Fruit Chan's *Jingzhe* (2013) is a good case in point. It is a filmic adaptation of a short story by the same title by a local female author Lee Pik Wah (2008), who is also the script writer. She builds her narrative around *Jingzhe*, "The Wake of Insects," one of the 24 Chinese Solar terms which takes place on the 27th of the first month of the lunar calendar. This calendrical reference reminds one of its remote Chinese cultural defaults. The narrative is set in an urban open public sphere situated in the terrain of everyday life Hong Kong, a city with high density. The horror engages the quotidian urbanity with the spectral, echoing Sanui's (2019) apt comment on Hong Kong horror films that they "often situate supernatural forces in the city's everyday social spaces specifically to embody a sense of dread and uneasiness among its dwellers of modern life's consequences" (p. 3). The narrative is unfolding in a space under the Canal Road flyover in Causeway

Bay on the Hong Kong island, a conjuncture of high-rise buildings, the commercial and the residential, a typical façade of developed area in this city. This leftover space or residual space in the city, in Crawford's (1999) sense, is "sanctioned, yet unofficial, highly visible but hidden" (p. 14). It is situated in "disused public spaces... that appear desolated, causing an unpleasant feeling of unease that is often associated with being haunted" (Knee, 2009, p. 73). Fruit Chan, the director who is made famous by his cinematic revelation of class predicament of "urban proletariats" (Dissanayake 2007) in Hong Kong, sees the potential in this space in the reiteration of the harsh reality that the unprivileged are confronting. Perceived negatively, this leftover space, void of a definite meaning, is open for reinterpretation by its users who assemble for the special event of crushing their enemies with the cursing services of hitting a paper doll, which cost them only a few tens, provided by the villain hitters – usually old women, the marginalized citizens.

The plot goes with Mrs. Chu, the protagonist who is a villain, busy performing her duty when she meets a ghost who is lining up for her services. The revenant returns without being summoned. Her grief cannot be settled as her murderers were set free after their trials. The old woman decides not to charge her for her service as she is on the side of the girl. Hoping that she will not be too cold walking barefoot, the old woman gives the girl back a shoe tainted with her blood which she found on that day of the murder. The story ends when the old woman finishes serving her last and very special client and then returns home, exhausted and longing for a deep sleep.

A traditional practice has been taking place to frame a place that inevitably contains a social space since cult activities will take place at fixed dates and in a fixed space. It conveys at the very least, repetition as well as a collective identity. Cultural history always appears spectral as "haunting is historical" (Derrida, 1994, p. 3). Both the original author and the director identify the spectrality within this. The director states in an interview that villain-hitting is a psychological compensation to drive out frustration. This act of hitting, a substitute for hiring a hitman, exhibits a subtle violence, and is horrifying ("Fruit Chan on villain-hitting," 2013). This violence, may find resonance in the viewer, resembles what Ebert (1981) argues is the lust of killing which is attached to the killer-character is not on screen. It is placed in the audience (p. 56). The absurdity stems further from the recognition of

the horrible practice by officiating its significance, thereby listing it under the “intangible cultural heritage” by the Hong Kong Affairs Bureau.

Although the adaptation retains the narrative structure of the original, it is not executed with rigorous fidelity in a literal sense. It expands to allude to the sanctification of the leftover space in which the marginalized dwellers survive through commodifying the social practice. Several scenes, displaying the punishment of characters’ criminality, were added to construe the plot as a more stereotypical narrative of a vengeful ghost. The killings are accompanied by the cursing actions of the ghost striking the paper dolls with the blood-tainted shoe while the actions are performed in different topographic locations, such as the rooftop and the entrance of old buildings, cheap massage parlour, Dai pai dong (open air food stall), “connecting to the banalities of everyday life” (Dissanayake, 2007). The crisscross pattern of moving images of urban lives helps consolidate the class segregation which has been a prominent theme in the director’s other films. Although Mrs. Chu’s life is not taken by the ghost, she does witness the death of her son who was involved in the murder.

The director begins the film by encapsulating two aspects of urban life, the commercial complex and the populate place, an urban ensemble with a pastiche of images of urban spatial fragments represented by Jameson’s “glass skin” high-rises. The images of buildings and traffic replace the city as if it were emptied of history and traditions. Set against these is another spatial sphere referenced through a cultural practice and is unfolded as the center stage of actions, the leftover space, which etches the original. This space, as a haunted space, is not the classical open space of haunting, such as graveyard, in Jameson’s sense. It is constructed and reiterated by social relations, a public sphere with political resonances. When the space is lighted up to estrange the familiar, a carnivalesque dimension is unfolded as to engage people and through which they transcend into this essential place for haunting.

The heavy presence of the city dissolves into fragments of busy everyday streets in disarray at night where the ghost is roaming like a city flaneur yet alienated and disconnected as if she were in a hermetic space. Her itinerary is punctuated by her travel method. The ghost successfully identifies a driver whose car is heading to the same destination for the same purpose. She continues her journey marked by a sense of bizarreness which is represented by this unintended coupling. Also, it is later in this confined

space of the car that a prelude of the history of the event is delivered by the woman driver after purchasing the service of villain hitting as to summon a spectre. The spectrality of this leftover space, emptied of any scared dimension, though it is crowded by different tiny shrines, or carnival sensation, resides in its conjuring potentiality, which is placed and visualized not by darkness, its normal association in the production of a spectral environment “favourable for haunting” (Derrida, 1994, p. 129) but by contradiction which makes this hidden space visible and to engender a historicized place. The lights serve as a signal for assembly turning the leftover space into a shared one. People, lining up for services, appear and disappear as if they were the revenant ghost, hoping to satisfy their unrealizable desires, a potential for the return, a repetition. They share the same impotence in this space, “a realm of otherness and of becoming-other” (Lefebvre 1974/1991, p. 187). However, the ghost and the old woman, representing the marginalized and the other, are empowered in this negative space because of the profession of the old woman in this social practice and the agency embodied in the ghost.

The place is ocularcentric with the choreography of chromatic movements between red and green conveying horror with the spectacles of violence absorbing the gaze of the audience. Contrary to the cultural dimension of red and green as referenced by Wolfram Eberhard (1983) in *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* that “red and green are the colours of life,” (p. 249) colour green is overwhelmingly negative in the place generating a sense of desolation corresponding to the haunting of a ghost. The pale shade of green washes over other colours articulating its permeability; it taints the merriment and happiness constructed by red which saturates the space and historicizes it because of the Chineseness it signifies. The space is textualized and animated by the close-ups of red altars, the worshipping of red candles and the burning incense and the people dressed in red tone. Together with the jostle and hustle of the people for their ways to their targeted service providers in this crowded space, this red reminds people of the Chinese temples for the worship of Chinese deities or the bustling Chinese celebration of festivals. Fruit Chan depicts this leftover space not as an abstract open space but an enclosure in which the event comes to be situated. The chromatic choice highlights, however, the occluding nature of this space in which the marginalized, such as Mrs. Chu, harbours.

The urban space, characterized with mobility is fragmentary and is punctuated with the intrusion of the ghost who rips up another temporal dimension. The disjuncture between the leftover space and this space is constructed with the hue of blue that connects Mrs. Chu and the ghost with the city. This connectivity is demonstrated by an astonishing arrangement of the episodic scenes of the elimination of the gangs of murderers through visually represented sequential actions. By doing so, the ghost is fighting against her oppressive past that comes alive as “the lever for the work of the present: obliterating the sources and the conditions that link the violence of what seems finished with the present” (Avery, 2008, p. 66). She, portrayed in the original as “the fine-looking girl” “with a sad look in her eyes” “speaks in a soft voice” (Lee, 2008, p.131) induces not fear but pity from Mrs. Chu. However, this ghost in the film asserts her power in upsetting spatial relations through multiple apparitions. Her force is destructive and fearful because “[i]t blasts through the rational, linearly temporal, and discrete spatiality of our conventional notions of cause and effect, past and present, conscious and unconscious” (Avery, 2008, p. 66). The spectral quality of being the invisible visible, echoes the presence of the leftover space, bringing into it the dynamic and the agency that the old woman is deprived of. This space, to her, is enclosed. Mrs. Chu is subject to an inevitable crisis, which further shows her powerlessness in front of the ghost. Her son, one of the murderers, is violently executed though she has been trying to warn him. The ghost spares the old woman who is an accomplice in the murder as she is too timid to report the case of kidnap of the girl. At the end, the powerful ghost after accomplishing her mission left this place of leftover space and shuttles, on foot, to the open space above the flyover and disappeared into the dark city whereas Mrs. Chu is delivered to the hospital.

Visualizing this place through cinematic apparatus becomes essential in the rendition of this narrative as there must be a place for a ghost to haunt. The spectrality connotes multiple temporalities, whereas the process of spectralization is spacing, a way to form the place for the event to take place. This place, constructed by leftover space, in Fruit Chan’s (2013) *Jingzhe*, is a fixation and thus historicized, and the presence of the ghost turns the linear time into a problematic one. The adaptation demonstrates that this rendition of spectrality is vision-centered, and can be understood as an expansion, the afterlife in terms of both translation and spectrality. It constitutes its authentication of the translation with visual registers reso-

nating Hermans (2014) ideas of the existence of a translation overtaking the place of the original and becomes “authentic texts and must forget that they used to exist as translations” (p. 10).

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