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Splinters of the Filmic Sentence: the intermedial dramaturgy of Peter Handke

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ABSTRACT – Splinters of the Filmic Sentence: the intermedial dramaturgy of Peter Handke

– This article presents an analysis of the first phase in Peter Handke's work. It focuses on a theoretical concept developed by Handke to highlight his filmic sentence. Upon analysis of several of his works, it appears that this aesthetic sensibility pervaded his theater, his novels, his debut as a filmmaker and the scripts he wrote in collaboration with Wim Wenders. As an interpretative summary of his work, the paper defends the existence of a link between the practice of *ekphrasis* and the emergence of an intermedial dramaturgy, in which the writing gesture needs to reinvent itself between languages borders, media, new technologies and materialities.

Keywords: **Performance. Intermediality. Playwright. Peter Handke. German Literature.**

RÉSUMÉ – Fragments de la Phrase Filmique: Peter Handke et son dramaturgie intermediale

– L'article présente une analyse de l'ensemble de la première phase de l'oeuvre de l'écrivain Peter Handke. On part d'une conception théorique développé par Handke lui-même, qui culmine a la phrase filmique. Au long de l'analyse on passe pour plusieurs ouvrages pour marquer que cette perception esthétique est présente dans son théâtre, ses romans, son premier film en tant que metteur en scène et les scripts de sa collaboration avec Wim Wenders. Pour résumer et interpréter son travail, l'article propose un lien entre la pratique de *ekphrasis* et l'émergence d'une dramaturgie intermédiaire, dans laquelle le geste d'écriture doit se réinventer entre langages, frontières, les médias et des nouvelles technologies.

Mots-clés: **Performance. Intermédialité. Dramaturgie. Peter Handke. La Littérature Allemande.**

RESUMO – Estilhaços da Frase Fílmica: a dramaturgia intermedial de Peter Handke

– O artigo realiza uma análise do conjunto da primeira fase da obra do escritor Peter Handke. Parte-se de um ensaio teórico elaborado pelo próprio Handke para dele destacar sua concepção de *frase fílmica*. Ao longo das análises de diversas obras constata-se como essa percepção estética perpassou seu teatro, seus romances, seu filme de estreia como diretor e os roteiros de sua colaboração com Wim Wenders. Numa síntese conceitual e interpretativa da sua obra, o artigo propõe uma articulação entre a prática da *ekphrasis* e o surgimento de uma dramaturgia intermedial, na qual o gesto da escrita precisa se reinventar entre fronteiras de linguagens, mídias, novas materialidades e tecnologias.

Palavras-chave: **Performatividade. Intermedialidade. Dramaturgia. Peter Handke. Literatura Alemã.**

Introduction

Despite being recognized and held relevant for Germany arts scenario from the 1970s on, Peter Handke's work is usually read and presented in fragmented fashion. Sometimes his novels and prose work are emphasized; other times, his drama/theatrical work are highlighted; and, occasionally, his collaboration work as screenwriter for some of the most well-regarded movies by director Wim Wenders¹ are remembered. This paper sets out to paint a more harmonious and integrated panorama of the wide-ranging work of this Austrian-born (1942) writer. We will look at a bigger picture by transposing territorial and symbolic borders – the divisions between areas and languages that pale in comparison to other aesthetic drives.

It was not a random choice, therefore, to analyze a relevant part of the first phase of Handke's work, when, still in his youth, he moves with versatility from novel to play, from essays to newspaper pieces, from screenwriting to directing a television movie. This set of vertiginous transitions reveals writing drives that are transversal and incessant, marking the passages between media so that they become apparent in the work. Those wide-spanning strokes constitute the main gestures or tools of an intermedial dramaturgy, in which writing itself is reinvented as it creates tensions at the borders between media territories and their languages or traditions. An intermedial dramaturgy, we argue, would set a stage comprised of writing choices that surpass the existing literary repertoire of discrete, separate entities such as the book, the act of reading, the act of interpretation and *mimesis*. Displaying perpetual restlessness, Handke's intermedial dramaturgy – his *écriture* – sets out to dismantle this repertoire. However, it still needs to be mapped out and delineated carefully.

In between Theater and Cinema: the filmic sentence and the spectator's *locus*

In 1971, Handke publishes the essay *Theater und Film: Das Elend des Vergleichens* [Theater and Film: the misery of comparison], where he shares one of his most relevant language games (Handke, 1971a)². The essay begins with a quote from Pascal, the French philosopher, for whom any comparison between nature objects would be an act of impoverishment of

thought. The comparison always leans toward one side, which would weaken argumentation or a formulation. Subscribing to Pascal's idea, Handke deflects comparisons between theater and cinema, and makes use of irony in his language games. Subliminally, the essay puts forth an affirmative attitude of transversal conciliation within a dramaturgy of media that attempts to eradicate the paradoxes of the *paragone* – a term used to refer to the distinction, dispute and border between artistic languages in the Renaissance (Mitchell, 1995).

Whether as a cinephile, a film critic or a playwright, Handke has always expressed a level of intrigue toward the filmic syntax. It bears reminding that he counts Carl Theodor Dreyer, Robert Bresson and Friedrich Murnau among his favorite directors, while also following with excitement the rising works of François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Michael Snow, who were very contemporary at the time. So, that was a moment in which the debate on cinematographic language – anchored in an authorial and historical yearning – took the stage. It is in this context and amidst this scenery of movies and filmmakers that Handke realizes the strength of a narrative that is developed without symbols, often eschewing plot, and, in parallel, articulating images and sensations that, in order to call the attention (and imagination) of the spectators, create a very specific syntax.

It seems much more valuable to me the drive of the film that, in a precise *tempo*, moves along as a movie, calls attention to the great cinema dilemma: an order of images was achieved that can be valued like filmic syntax. Cinema accomplishes this feat without the deviation of description – which is necessary in literature. It's just a matter of showing images gradually, linearly and successively with each new film. A filmic image is not naïve, it transforms, through history, into all of the filmic images, it is an enactment; that is, it shows enactment performance, either consciously or unconsciously, of things filmed until the filming of things. In such a procedure, the things in the films will both be filmed and singled out as enactments. The enactment performed by things functions as an expression of the things filmed, so that this enactment yields a series of similar enactments of the things it produces. All of those things bear the same value. We can assert that they transform into a filmic sentence, in fact, that they stem from and were built out of a model of filmic sentences. The enactment and the filmic sentence are again positioned almost in canonical relationship with enactment, with prior and posterior filmic sentences (Handke, 1971a, p. 68-69, my translation).

Handke finds in that filmic syntax one of the vital hinges toward overcoming the dilemmas that characterized, according to him, the contemporary literature of his time; that is, “descriptive impotence” (Handke, 1971a)³. Subtly, Handke praises the powers of neutrality – in symbolic senses – and suggestion that images can elicit. It is the rhythm of image sequencing that fascinates Handke, the fascination of a writer who finds, amidst the secrets of this visual grammar, a syntax-generating mechanism in his own prose, in his dramaturgical and literary representations. In that same vein, the filmic sentence as perceived by Handke lies beyond the characters, and therefore also overcomes a dramatic nexus base on the protagonists’ nucleus, the dialogues and the plot. On the other side of the border, the filmic sentence colludes objects, things, pictures, lights – and characters. It bears connotation, of course, but the paths to meaning are traversed by the sequencing of images. It is in the sentence, and through the sentence – on a literary-cinematographic unit –, that Handke weaves the threads of a type of prose that covers his dramaturgy and filmography. By this decisive emphasis on the filmic sentence, Handke then treats his reader as a spectator, a moviegoer, and, curiously enough, takes his writing and his prose to the vicinity of a film script, precisely because he is dealing with sentences that invite filmic imagination, that turn the act of reading into an instance of cinematographic visualization.

The second aspect that is worth singling out in his essays is the specific cinematographic time and the way that plot and narrative would unfold – or happen, according to Handke, in the experience of watching a movie. In his review of the film *The Bride Wore Black* (1968) by François Truffaut, he realizes that a story does not represent a previously given and pre-designed reality, as would be the case of a mimetic aesthetics, in its most diverse variations, but, on the contrary, the syntax of the story unfolds during and within the aesthetic and narrative experience of watching a movie. More than deciphering the narrative (and its pertaining plot), the spectator must awaken, through observation, the mechanisms that allow for the story to be found. Moreover, this is why a cinematographic syntax would elicit more movements, more shifts than interpretive readings. The instantaneity of the narrative-cinematographic event that, for Handke, would promote a possible abandonment of the mimetic and hermeneutic paradigm.

The flow of the movie is clearly foreshadowed: the story is not invented, it is found; that is, the movie acquaints the spectator with the story. Here there is no prior creation of the story of the film: formal procedures are pre-established so that variation is no longer possible (Handke, 1971a, p. 71, my translation. Emphasis added).

A story, then, that is not invented, created (or decoded), but found. The act of finding this story, of fabricating and imagining this narrative, would be, for Handke, an inherent duty of the film spectator that they would astutely transport and migrate to other art forms such as drama and prose. Taking one step further, Handke favors a dramaturgical grammar that generates non-representational events, thus shifting the focus to the way the spectator will need to handle, in the real-time, with the sequences of images, sounds and ambience. This emphasis on present time and the sensorial sequencing, in its flux, allows, through the syntax of cinema, for a disposition of narrating and weaving dramaturgical events that are not necessarily anchored in a plot and an Aristotelian unfolding of dramatic action. In that sense, Handke's characters do not need to act, since, as an image prior and simultaneous to the non-action, they take place, on the scene, beyond dramatic action. It is by way of this mechanism – and this transfusion of cinematographic grammar – that Handke also eschews characters, like, for instance, in *Kaspar* or his *Offending the Audience* (*Publikumsbeschimpfung*), which features purely actors firing articulated speech. The exploration of the filmic sentence allowed Handke to re-insert the dramaturgical roles (since they were not to be strictly dramatic) of speech and image on stage, in the pages and on screen (Handke, 2015, 2000; 1971a).

“This is no play!” (Handke, 2000; p. 9). This is one of the opening lines of the play *Offending the Audience* (Image 1), from 1966, soon after his intervention with the *Gruppe 4*, stirring the art scene of the time. Written for four voices – and as an oral play, without images –, Handke, from the start, emphasizes that there is only the present moment: a now and a now and a now. Curiously enough, this set of spoken plays by Handke is elaborated entirely with simple, short, direct speech (phrases with well-defined subjects and predicates), and, deprived of the subterfuge of plot, carved out as effrontery, speak to the audience up until a climax, a juvenile and provocative anti-catharsis in the form of a string of insults uttered directly to the public. Where the present instant of the phrase is pre-eminently cine-

matographic, movement, as Handke's second aesthetic pillar, installs itself in the space between the two phrases. Movement, in short, would be syntactical, a device to annul the plot, since phrases often elaborate and compose contradictory sensorial response. It would be a grammar or a language game that installs a null transformation that is also open to the affects and sensations of the spectators. It bears pointing out, then, that semantic nullity is the result of radical parataxis, by which no phrase, either filmic or theatrical, is invested of greater importance than another. As those logical sentences end up contradicting one another, they suggest a meaning hiatus, which, paradoxically, leads the audience to a place of ambiguity with no escape routes.



Image 1 – Pictures of the premier of *Offending the Audience* (1966), directed by Claus Peymann. Source: Suhrkamp Publishing House.

Offending the audience (*Publikumsbeschimpfung*) and *Self-accusation* (*Selbstbezeichnung*) are precisely the two plays whereupon Handke tests and puts into practice his first reflections on movement and the filmic phrase. Handke's proposal is to refrain from playing theatrically according to the conventions that guide the relationships between actors, the stage and the audience. His intention, however, becomes paradoxical and highlights the conflicting forces between text and scene. On one hand, there is the sober and vehement disavowal, uttered by the actors, of the elements of drama. On the other hand, the scene is not empty, the stage is not abandoned, there is no breaking of the famous fourth wall. Thus, the dramatic act, in Peter Handke's *spoken plays*, lies upon a border: both plays disavow the illusion game, but, in the text, they offer nothing more than games among words, phrases (once again) that are logically chained and, in the end, re-

turn, like in a vicious circle, to affirm the presence of acting, of the play, of the scene and the audience.

This is no drama. No action that has occurred elsewhere is reenacted here. Only a now and a now and a now exist here. This is no make-believe which re-enacts an action that really happened once upon a time. Time plays no role here (Handke, 2000, p. 15).

Offending the Audience marks precisely this direct addressing, without subterfuge, of the theater audience. In that sense, the entire structure of the play aims at making the public perceive itself as audience, as passive subjects that paid to watch a play looking for a moment of aesthetic pleasure, and which, in some measure, also perceives itself as too settled. However, this act, this choice of including the audience as the main scenic element is not taken to any superior dramatic act. It is suspended. Extended. And, this, in this tense state, remains throughout the whole play.

You are aware of your presence. You know that it is your time that you are spending here. You are the topic. You tie the knot. You untie the knot. You are the center. You are the occasion. You are the reasons why. You provide the initial impulse. You provide us with words here. (Handke, 2000, p. 21).

This dramatic drought also seeps into the instructions given to the actors. In fact, the actors do nothing but speak. They are not supposed to act. They are not supposed to dramatize. They cannot even display any kinds of distinction in terms of outfits and costumes. By making themselves equal to the audience, they disavow any kind of distinction and projection. Thus, in *Offending the Audience*, the actors unfold into four voices. Nothing more than four voices. It is out of this cacophony of technical voices – film voices, radio station voices, simultaneous translation and soccer narration voices – that Handke wants weave his linguistic deconstruction, his emptying of the dramatic and call out the theater spectator toward cinematographic instantaneity.

Notably, the phrases uttered by the four actors make up a counterpoint between the perceptions of Handke regarding the spectator, the filmic phrase and the syntactic movements we outlined above. In parallel, it is interesting to note how Handke also transposes those counterpoints to his silent plays of the 1960s, such as *Das Mündel will Vormund sein*. Basically descriptive and with pantomime-like mannerisms, Handke's play emphasizes

the gestural and bodily interaction of the spectators, as well as the sounds of objects, the sound design, ambient music and lighting. On one hand, the articulation of images is close to that of a silent movie (or its script). On the other hand, the sound suggestions that happen on stage are similar to the concatenation of radio plays (*Hörspiel*) that Handke wrote in the 1960s. Whether silent or spoken, soundscape-driven, verbal or without images, one notices transversally the repetitive strokes that write up the same sentence, in which the direct addressing of the spectator and the syntactic movements are harmonized like the atoms of an aesthetic whose core objective would be to disavow and sublimate drama.

This texture of voices and sounds is indirectly related to the spoken plays (*Sprechstücke*) and the silent plays⁴, when Handke makes his word-image play more complex and goes on to write for specific media such as radio and cinema. A work such as *Wind und Meer* (Handke, 1970), for instance, also eschews speech and dialogue by the actors and composes a narrative with nothing but sounds, noise, pause, in a dense description that aims at suggest and create to the listener visual and sensorial elements, images and rhythms. What is interesting about this perspective is how it awakens a writing gesture that is more closely related to musical composition in order to sublimate, through sound, a dramaturgical tradition centered primarily in words.

However, the play *Hörspiel Nr.2* (Handke, 1970) is the one that is more focused on a description of sounds and noise revealing an acutely (in)visible city. It features a dramaturgy that takes place in the streets of Berlin and has taxi drivers who wander around town like one of its groups of protagonists. Through the eyes of the taxi drivers and the sounds they come across, *Hörspiel Nr.2* suggests images that lead the listeners to the urban reality of Berlin in the 1960s and, thus, as in a description, permeated by filmic sentences – stemming from his experience with *spoken plays*, it ends up transforming the listener in a spectator. They are quick shots of a metropolitan *flanerie* that happens among the car, the driver, the passengers, the street and the passers-by and capture the movement of people, the moments and the sensations that echo between the metropolis and its residents. It may not be just by chance that some of those plays avoid a more conventional way of suggesting images. It is through the absence of images

in radio, or the minimalist imagery of the stage, that Handke seeks to rekindle the chemistry of imagination in the spectator's mind, essential for them to be able to see and place the facts of a story in front of their eyes. Or, at the same time, it is through the very absence of the word that the images acquire their own life and dynamics, like a purified *voyeurism*, faced with the daily blasting of media images.

From the Filmic Sentence to the Screen: a writer in shades

Interestingly, this emphasis on the filmic sentence was effective. In 1971, Handke is commissioned by WDR, the public television broadcaster in Western Germany, which remains on air, to write the screenplay for a TV movie⁵. *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse* (Handke 1971b), the first film written and directed by Peter Handke⁶ runs with some of his dramaturgical formulations (Image 2). On film, what we see isn't drama, but frames, shots and autonomous short cuts that don't make up a complete narrative arc, which nevertheless do not abstain from having characters, the physical presence of actors and minimal plotting, however irrelevant, to engender the filmic sensations elicited by Handke. In a very succinct manner – which would not be the index of a synopsis – Handke wrote a script that tells the story of a group of thieves, terrorists and agitators lead by Spade (Rüdiger Vogler) and how they approached, in an aggressive, violent, but above all symbolic manner, the daily lives of managers and executives, among who the character Mcnamara (Gerd Mayen), president of the World Bank, is the most prominent.



Image 2 – Scene and poster of *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse* (1971), by Peter Handke. Source: Struck (2013).

Even though it appears in a silent scene in the movie, in which only the sound of the wind can be heard, this dynamic of the filmic sentence is thereupon reinstated and explored. We are presented with a long take: a man and a woman in an apartment are facing each other. While she – Libgart Schwarz – starts to type something on a typing machine, he – Spade – appears and gently removes the sheet of paper from the machine. She walks through the room – with the camera following her without cuts –, picks up the phone and starts dialing a number, then Spade intervenes and removes the phone from her hand; she turns on the television and stretches out on an armchair, then, incisively, he breaks the TV signal; she goes to a minibar and gets a drink, then he takes the drink from her hand and puts it back in the fridge; more agitated now, she tries to pass by him, and Spade, the character, one of the protagonists of the movie, again stretches out his arm and hinders her with a physical barrier; they exchange looks, she caresses his face, the camera closes in, then comes a kiss and a cut. Here, the silent theater scenes are still echoing in a belated, cinematographic muteness.

At a later step, however, Handke gets it right in transposing the issue of the cinema spectator over to the television spectator. In this passage, the literary genre of chronicle, of the small events of daily life, acquires a different relevance. In an afterword to the published script, Handke states that he had made a literary television movie and that there was a kind of allegory in this loss of glamour, as if the TV movie alluded to the cinematographic film. More than that, the syntax and the movement of the youngsters – who are listening to *When I was young*, smoking and chatting – seek to instate a meta-spectator of movies.

Working the moviola satisfied me: it was a tranquil job, akin to the focus I achieved when writing the script: I could access, once again, my own output, and state what I wanted and what I've done [...] The more steadfastly one resists to live it out, the more similar a cinematographic movie becomes to a television movie (Handke, 1972, p. 137, my translation).

Handke, with this statement, refers to his most intimate reunion with the film itself, soon after the shooting, when, during the cutting, the author reclaims total control of the work, closer to the act of literary writing, even though, in this step of the cinematographic writing, he would still be eager to wrap up his filmic sentences and his intermedial dramaturgy. It is

through the films, on the other hand, as well as the scripts and Handke's collaboration with Wim Wenders that we can get a better understanding of the importance of the concept of *movement* for this aesthetic, in the work of this particular writer. Explicitly, movement is connected to the road. In his first book of poems, titled *Die innerwelt der au erwelt der innerwelt*, Handke, in a very Dadaist-like collage, copies all the opening titles, with the original typeface and in German, of the movie *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), considered one of the first and most impacting *road movies* in the history of cinema (Corrigan, 1986). It is not by chance that in *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse* there are several takes inside the car, in a more explicit attempt at an escape and chase scene, as well as in a narrative that engenders a parataxis of sequences like on a trip. Like in a musical fugue, the escape, the wandering, the gallivanting are, in Handke's cinematographic work, mottos and composition schemes dear to the dramaturgical development.

Movement, here, does not just stand for image-movement (Deleuze, 1985)⁷, which takes place in and between frames, but also the way it is observed, the way it follows the outcome of scenery, locations and places, and to the ways those rhythms affect the characters. The internal movement of films seen on television establishes a counterpoint with the movement of a gaze, by the spectator, that is more restless, more ordinary and, paradoxically, invested with latent boredom. In *Chronik*, many of the *tableaux-vivants*, counter posed with Mahler and Wagner's music, for instance, aim at establishing an instant of gaze that is not the television gaze, just to, soon afterward, get back to superficial banality – without judgement of value – of the chronicle of image and daily life.

In addition to being featured in one of the Austrian writer's movies, those stirrings reverberate among his plays, books, novels and narratives. Almost defiantly, *The goalkeeper's fear of the penalty*, Handke's second novel, is filled with these cinematographic movements, with filmic sentences, and a very peculiar reflection about the chemistry of the reader-spectator. Typically Kafkaesque, the first sentence of the book engenders a movement that is internal to the narrative and external to the character. Joseph Block, a mechanic and famous former goalkeeper, as he is let go from his job, gets a taxi, walks around town, goes to the central market. It was a beautiful October day, Bloch has a sausage and gets into a movie theater. Everything he

sees in the movie upsets him. Still, it is in the theater that he manages to breathe, relieved. Fast-paced and dynamic, the movement, in the book, happens squarely in the present and rarely resorts to retrospective. There is the simulation of automated writing and, discreetly, the narrative will never mention or speculate about the reasons behind Bloch's redundancy. It will not reflect on the psychological impact of that either. There is only a now – that of the character – superposed to another now – that of the reader-spectator.

However, Bloch walks, strolls, moves around. He sleeps in hotels and inns, gets on trains and taxis, moves on foot and by car. His destination is unknown, as well as why he is moving. The redundancy throws him out in the world, and, like a vain escape, he sets off another escape, articulated, internal and externally (as it belongs to the narrator also), which engenders nothing but the will to escape. Suddenly, with no explanation or motivation, he kills a ticket agent. Not even this murder, executed without ado, betrays an apparent reason. The escape is not just a parataxis, but the direct transposition of the *schemata* of a road movie that engenders something close to a *road book*. We also know that Bloch displays schizophrenic symptoms, which, more than a justification for the crime he committed, offer a literary worldview, in which senses, sensations and images are sharpened. Internally to the narrative and externally to the character, the movement sets up a way of seeing and perceiving the world in which images and symbols are disjointed, or reading versus seeing the world. It is the intensity of the perception of schizophrenic Bloch that Handke desires to share.

Everything he saw was conspicuous. The pictures did not seem natural but looked as if they had been made specifically for the occasion. They served some purpose. As you looked at them, they jumped out at you. 'Like call letters', thought Bloch. Like commands. When he closed his eyes, and looked again afterwards, everything seemed to be different. The segments that could be seen seemed to glimmer and tremble at their edges (Handke, 2007, p. 123-124).

Bloch's estrangement from the world comes from both his schizophrenia and his wanderlust. Somehow, images jump from the page, and the pages call back the images, in a game that is as schizophrenic as it is territorial, as if Bloch – and the reader-spectator – needed to unlearn in order to re-learn how to see. In one of the most famous passages of the novel, the al-

phabet gets transfigured into drawings, as if the point of view of the character started seeing things without concepts, a direct vision between object and gaze, a hypothetical, speculative vision (Image 3). In this trajectory, Bloch asks himself: “*I wonder if the image was inverted?*”. He is in a bedroom and starts to notice the objects more closely, in their arrangement. His gaze functions as if on a reading. He sees a wardrobe, a small table and repeats it, as if his gaze transformed into the panoramic motion of a camera: he sees from left to right, then the other way around, and, suddenly, the objects, like words referring to things, turn into drawings and symbols that refer to words. The interesting thing about the motion of the gaze is the way Bloch approaches the window. He observes what is outside: the train tracks; a passing train; a bicycle; a mailman; a mailbox.

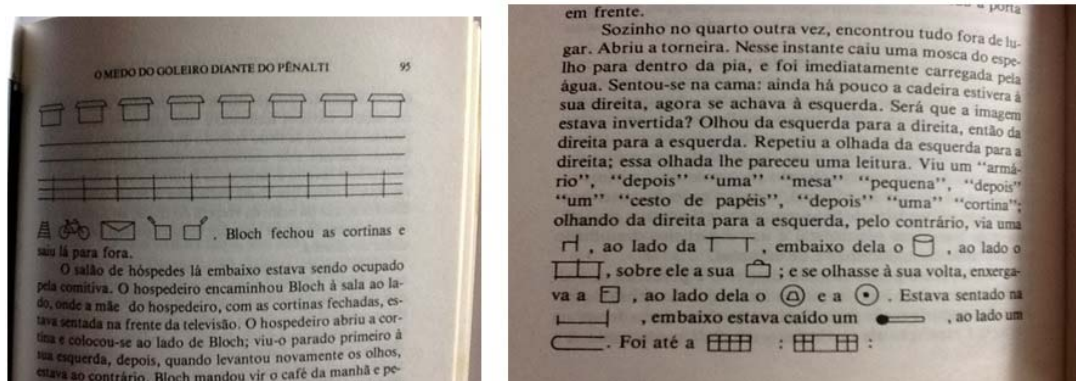


Image 3 – Images of Bloch’s drawings from *The goalkeeper’s fear of the penalty*. Source: Handke (1988).

With this dynamic, Handke duplicates the gaze of the reader and the spectator. This translates into the narrative mannerisms that get stuck into Bloch, like the former goalie who watches the goalie in action, or the schizophrenic murderer who watches a football match while he is running away from the police. Disconnected, Bloch observes the world like he was reading it, and sees or reads facts like instantaneous images. Immediate and concise, Bloch’s gaze leads the reader to create their own movement of viewing and imagination, and, where this is quite common in each novel, in *The goalkeeper’s fear of the penalty*, it is that viewing dynamics – between word and image and within the filmic phrase – that turns into the very motto of the novel. Thus, each short sentence generates an image superposed to another image, which, in a parataxis, is not more important than the previous one or the next one, as if we were watching a movie that is a movie that is a movie.

The movement, therefore, is internal and elusive in regard to any teleology. The movement: an open route toward a non-cathartic transformation. A slide through the chemistry of image until it hits the eyes of the reader. Like an open invitation to a broad and endless process of transformation, the movement has no goal; it is, by nature, erratic. This concern with movement, intimately linked to the filmic sentence, drives Handke to write the script of *The Wrong Move* (*Falsche Bewegung*), which is a free adaptation of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. A few months later, this script turned into the fifth feature film directed by Wim Wenders, and the second of three partnerships between the writer and the director (Image 4). Curiously enough, Handke opted for writing a film script directly, without going through the novel adaptation phase. As if he had rather meet the filmic sentence and the character's movement during the writing process, as if he had rather visualize his phrases such as they would occur within a movie. In a direct manner, Handke's approach of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (Goethe, 2006) reveals how close the narrative tradition of *Bildungsroman* was to his stirrings⁸.



Image 4 – Scenes from *The wrong move* (1975), by Wim Wenders, written by Peter Handke. Source: Rever Angle.

In tandem with a *Bildungsroman* structure, the script (and the movie) *The Wrong Move* configures a *road movie* narrative. This dynamic evokes a singular experience of the modern man, of new makeups that claim other forms of writing, of dramaturgy and aesthetic relationship with the world. However, throughout the script, Wilhelm wonders about the role of writing in the contemporary world, as if, in the movement of his escape, of his shelters and meetings, he would forge the perception and sublimation of his identity crisis.

More than physical, the territory also alludes to the materialities – mediatic, physical, the supports – by which languages are erected; thus, the act of leaving, going away, taking risks and abandoning the native sod would also go through a will to surrender to other languages. This tension between two distinct formative dynamics, between writing and the camera, appears to be synthesized in the way Handke portrayed the protagonist in the script *Falsche Bewegung* (Handke, 1976). His Wilhelm Meister no longer wants to be the theater man, like Goethe's protagonist dreamed of before. Neither does he intend to be a moviemaker or a *cinema man*, in which case the shift would be too obvious and direct. The Wilhelm from *The Wrong Move* dreams about writing, but does not know what to write or how he would write it. It is not just creative block or an elusive muse, classic themes of movies involving writers and screenwriters, but a total shift of meaning of writing before the objective world that surrounds him, faced with its objects and new experiences. As if writing no longer could be fulfilling or sufficient, in comparison with what it once was, for the formation of the individual. Even then, even insufficient as it has now become, erratic and incomplete, the writing gesture would be necessary.

With *The Wrong Move*, the dream of achieving identity solely through writing is dissolved. That does not mean that the promise of art of sketching out a better world, where one can finally live without alienation, is filed away, excluded once and for all. It only means that it cannot be accomplished in the present state of things (Buchka, 1987, p. 88, my translation).

It is, then, a tension between the seen things, in an immediate present that cannot be narrated, and the memories, or the isolation, which would be specific ways of representing the world through writing. It is not by chance that the script published by Peter Handke suggests an ending that represents that idea well – and is tellingly absent in the movie, after Wenders' intervention. As he says goodbye to Therese and resumes traveling on his own, Wilhelm decides to head to the Zugspitze, one of Germany's peaks, where his shape is projected toward a bleak horizon and landscape, surrounded by snow, pointing toward an abyss, a new and uncertain direction. Peter Handke's script indicates typewriter sounds for this very scene, juxtaposed to the image (Handke, 1976). There is also a storm, so that the moment is more restless and cloudy than what is depicted in the film. It is as if this tension between individual formation, image and writing

created a unique moment and meaning. As if the impasse of Wilhelm's formation also went through a dialectics without the synthesis between word and image, literature and cinema, the classic education, founded on literate culture, and the contemporary, perhaps with a calling for an immersion into technical images. Tellingly, this Wilhelm Meister of Peter Handke's does not hesitate between the theater and the business world, but he wants to be a writer who, at the end – of the script and the movie – ends up, at the height of his formation process, inscribing the world in front of a camera or moving on to, in fact, transpose the borders that separate filming and writing.

***Ekphrasis* between film and novel**

When there is rhythm and alternation between sentence and image, is there also *ekphrasis*? Would the movements and the filmic sentence be ways of weaving *ekphrasis* within a game of poetics, *diegesis* and *mimesis*? Those complex questions lead to a dangerous, seductive, necessary digression, as well as a back-to-back reading of the other works by Peter Handke. Directly or indirectly, the filmic sentence reverberates in an amalgam of modern poetic and dramaturgical formulations and, confronting this scenario, it is important to contrast Handke's experimentations – which are commonly situated between languages and media – and some of the more recent concepts, that are sometimes focused on theater and sometimes spanning the whole of contemporary art.

One of the results of what Jacques Rancière (2005) calls the great parataxis yields, curiously enough, an imagistic sentence that is transversal to several languages, ready for a conceptual operation that has the bivalent goal of establishing and dealing with this great parataxis as well as proposing ruptures. What is interesting about Rancière's conception is how it incorporates unrepresentative stirrings that operate on the surface, in the realm of the senses, but also do not necessarily lie on the image or the *utterable*, the word. Transversal, this style of imagistic sentence would be a tendency of contemporary art:

The sentence is not the utterable, the image is not the visible. By sentence-image I mean the union of two functions to be aesthetically defined; that is, by the way they detach the representative relationship between text and im-

age [...] The image becomes the active, disruptive power, the leap of a change of regime between two classes of senses. The sentence-image is the union of those two functions. It is the unit that duplicates the chaotic power of the great parataxis in the form of sentence, of continuity and power of rupture. As a sentence, it embraces the power of parataxis by resting before its schizophrenic explosion. As an image, it is respite from its disruptive power, the great slumber of exhaustion or the great collective ecstasies of the bodies. The sentence-image retains the power of the great parataxis and opposes what it loses within our schizophrenia or consensus (Rancière, 2005, p. 56, my translation).

There is, on the other hand, a possible Platonic remnant in the *modus operandi* of Rancière's sentence-image. The emphasis on the conceptual operation of those sentence-images would lead primarily to a new effort of deciphering than to a crystalline-state perception of the aesthetic event; as if the phrase was the guiding thread that allowed the subject to reach the concepts. Even though it is agglutinated to the sensorial, the sentence-image would lead – the spectator, the interpreter or the philosopher – to decipher pre-announced ideas, which, in their turn, would stimulate a politics of aesthetics. Ultimately, the sentence-image would reveal itself as a manifestation of ideas which, despite being aesthetic and sensorial, would be transposed by the work and interact, but would again lead to a current of concepts.

Along with Rancière, we would find ourselves faced with a mode of writing that takes place before and after the scene, or the work. Going with Handke's filmic sentence, in contrast, the writing is established during the event of the scene, and it is in this duration span, unpredictable and intrinsically chaotic, that there is an attempt to not generate a precursory architecture of meanings that would empty – through the abrogation of meanings – the intentions of an aesthetic of politics. It is by means of language games that the articulation of those filmic sentences creates a parataxis, a superposing that stays taut and later suggests, without setting limits, the games and the possibilities of meaning. The ruptures in Handke's filmic sentences are primarily ethical and unveil another – less teleological – relationship, an open one in fact, and yield a sort of game of questions directed to the reader and the spectator, pregnant with mystery. The comparison, in fact, serves only to stress how, in Rancière, the sentence is a gateway to understanding the work. To Handke, in contrast, the sentence and the de-

scription are connected to a broad aesthetic description project, linked to the *ekphrasis* tradition, aimed precisely at catching glimpses of a liminary dramaturgy, installed, precisely and evasively, in between traditions, languages and media.

Let's look further, however, into how Handke approaches *ekphrasis* and his attempts to update it in his experiments. Movement, in Handke's prose and filmic sentences, is more than erratic; it is a way of traveling between movements and creating transits between word and image, as a way of transcending limits. In 1972, Handke publishes *Short letter, long farewell*, which narrates a character's trip through the United States. At the time, Handke was under the influence of Edward Hopper's pictorial atmosphere, which favors the isolated individual in the midst of the lights and the aesthetic experiences of American cities. Handke, then, ends up concocting a mix of simulated thriller and half formation novel, in which images, photography, the billboards and radio news articulate the core of the sensations captured by the traveling protagonist. Keeping with our line of argument, it is worth highlighting an excerpt of this novel, in which the narrator walks into a movie theater to watch *Young Mr. Lincoln*, by John Ford, a movie that tells the tale of Abraham Lincoln's formative years, when he was still a young and unknown lawyer. Handke's narrative leads us to the movie session and beyond. That is the context for the following citation:

Sitting in her covered wagon, their mother had witnessed the fight, but she refused to say which of her sons was the murderer. Some drunks tried to lynch the brothers, but Lincoln stopped them by softly reminding them of themselves, of what they were, what they could be, and what they had forgotten. This scene – Lincoln on the wooden steps of the jailhouse, with his hand on the mob's battering ram – embodied every possibility of human behavior. In the end, not only the drunks, but also the actors playing the drunks, were listening intently to Lincoln, and when he had finished they dispersed, changed forever. All around me in the theater I felt the audience breathing differently and coming to life again (Handke, 2011 p. 188-189).

This excerpt is clearly a passing instance, a fleeting, passing moment of *ekphrasis*, in its most classic and traditional sense: a description not of a painting, but a cinematographic scene taken as a painting. In describing this central moment in Ford's movie, Handke tries to share not just the scene, but the very moment when the scene was experienced; not just its experi-

ence but the feelings of the actors, between the character and the enactment of the scene. As if the scene's picture, with the framing provided by the movie theater, the *tableaux-vivant* of that instant, had been frozen by the literary taste of *ekphrasis*. However grounded in the classic verbal description of an image, this *ekphrasis* highlights a point of view, a gaze and a mode of experimentation that is important for the author, the narrator or the character. It is, perhaps, an *ekphrasis* intimately related to what Heffernan calls post-modern literature, in which the experience of the gaze is central for the realization of the transit between painting and literature.

There is something new in ekphrasis [...]. Earlier Ekphrastic poetry represents the poet's state of mind chiefly by indirection, if at all. Only rarely does the poet say explicitly what he or she feel about a work of art [...]. Ashbery's poem simply makes explicit what all ekphrasis entails and implies: the experience of the viewer, and the pressure of that experience on his or her interpretation of the work of art (Heffernan, 2004, p. 182-183).

Keeping with the trajectory of *Short letter, long farewell*, that same scene of *Young Mr. Lincoln* is broadened, in literary terms, and becomes central in Handke's diluted narrative. Ford's movie allowed the protagonist of the novel to penetrate and discover an essence of America. It was not by chance that the entire trajectory of the narrator culminates in an encounter with moviemaker John Ford, whereupon a real person enters fiction. Thus, going beyond the framing of the description of a scene, by means of scenes that surround a movie, they end up suggesting other narratives, other images. Handke's character is guided by Hopper and Ford's landscapes, lost and dissipated landscapes, which afford them with a romantic and melancholic tinge. The character, then, tries to create his own images within this fugitive scenery. This dynamic may be clearly perceived in the excerpt below, in which the power of Ford's presence seems to be the goal of this description.

He took us to his study and showed us a pile of movie scripts; writers were still sending them to him. 'There are some good stories in there', he said. 'Simple and clear. The kind of stories we need'. His wife was standing behind us in the doorway; he turned toward her and she smiled. The housekeeper brought him coffee in a tin cup. He drank with his head high, his free hand propped on his hip; clumps of white hair protruded from his ears. His wife came closer and pointed to the photographs on the wall: in one of them John Ford was directing a picture; he was sitting in a director's swivel chair with a beekeeper's mask on his face; a few people, likewise in beekeeper-

er's masks, were sitting and standing around him; at his feet lay a dog with his ears folded back. In another photograph, he had just finished a picture, he was kneeling on one knee, holding the tripod of a movie camera; the whole cast was with him, their heads inclined in his direction; one actor had his hand on the camera, as though caressing it (Handke, 1974, p. 271-272).

This passage sees the directing of the narrative toward two very telling images. Handke first guides us to a picture hanging on a wall, which would be a call back to a moment when Ford was filming *The iron horse* (1924) and the director, realizing this direction of the gaze, then narrates some of the behind-the-scenes of that moment. Gradually, the section leads to Ford's gaze, who is looking at the landscape through the window and sees something moving outside, which leads to the phrase about roads in the United State. However, it is through those images that Handke exerts a fictional and rhetoric power of Ford's presence, as if his real index, as a filmmaker, an aesthete of image and landscapes, was linked to the power of the image itself to make us see, to make us believe.

The ending of *Short letter, long farewell* calls back to a sort of visual, ghostlike apparition that, in Peter Handke's literary career, will be developed in more detail over his 1980s output, much like in his more recent dramaturgy. In this novel, then, we have a meeting of narrative, *diegesis* and *ekphrasis*, when image itself appears as autonomous, before the eyes of the character and is rhetorically suggested to the reader. This concern with purifying and inserting the image through itself would also be a way of making some distance from the Western literature mimetic tradition, since it aims less at the reproduction of an event than the accomplishment of a literary instant of visual fabling, which reveals itself as an event. In that sense, Handke's path alternates between the thwarting of the illusion of image and a concern with bringing some redemptive effect, even sublime, of the phenomenological experience of the gaze, to the table.

Writing as Presence: from autopoiesis to intermedial dramaturgy

In a peculiar fashion, the dramaturgical and literary work of Peter Handke ends up bringing up distinct stirrings and traditions that deal, both straightforwardly and tangentially, with the *ekphrasis* phenomenon. Whether through the abrogation of image, or the act of omitting the word – like

in Laocoon's sculpture and silent scream, or through the metamorphoses of the listener into spectator through Hopper's paintings, Ford's films or even the landscapes in his essays and novels – Peter Handke's *ekphrases* seek to revive a transformation path that combines the word, orality and visual frameworks. They are *flashes* of *ekphrasis* that teem among speeches, phrases, paintings, films, spaces, landscapes, and cities. They may consist of a programmatic act, dressed up as fable, which projects scenes on screens that are not the individual memories of readers, listeners and spectators.

Going one step further, we may realize that the *ekphrasis* in Handke's first phase is a transversal stroke in his writing that ends up associated with the filmic sentences, the movements, the magic of the spectator. Indifferent to the frontiers of media and the traditions of poetic or narrative genres, the *ekphrasis* is the lifeline of an incessant, erratic movement that has no exact goal. Although discreet and latent, *ekphrasis* will allow Handke to shift his writing, to see it anew, to form it as he is formed; it will allow him to see himself as he writes; to see himself as a writer while also being a screenwriter and filmmaker; and to see himself, as a writer, also as a cinephile, a moviegoer, someone who, reflected in the cinematographic image, identifies his own contours, invigorating a Greek-Roman rhetoric tradition. Uncertain, the time of formation unfolds and projects itself as the very moment of transformation.

However, there is something more. Actively, the writer is not dissimulated, but instead moves on to write in the present time, at the time of reading, of performing, along the spectator's fruition. Within a broad panorama of performance aesthetics, *autopoiesis* favors this precise moment in which the acting calls attention to itself, in which the actor is responsible for the dramatic feelings, but this instant in which the scene becomes an evidence of itself is also needed in order to reverberate directly with the spectator. *Autopoiesis* does not articulate the actions associated with drama, but the instant in which the scene emerges and gets transfigured between the spectator and the audience. More than a reflective act, of meta-theater or meta-language, *autopoiesis* puts in evidence the situations in which bodies and presences are transfigured into full-fledged feelings or sensations. We would risk a synthesis: *autopoiesis* would be a poetics of transformation – evident in itself, a crystal-clear, null, non-cathartic metamorphosis.

The conditions for permanent attention, as occurs in the staging of arrival and emergence, represent and at least defend non-ordinary, exceptional deeds. The experience stemming from this emergence and autopoiesis, and from the permission awarded by a feedback, corresponds, on the other hand, to many of our day-to-day experiences (Fischer-Lichte, 2004, p. 292, my translation).

Autopoiesis would, then, be dealing with a form of evidence of the presence in the scenic process, which, paradoxically, would not desire a reflection about language but just to re-introduce it, re-stage it, distinctly and discreetly. By transposing *autopoiesis* from the stage to prose – and from prose to the screen – Handke casts light precisely upon the instances of writing, and not, once again, as a metalinguistic device – which would be a discourse *about* language, but it invites the reader and the spectators to, together, *pari passu*, minimize the distance between writing and reading and, in an open process of sharing meanings, observe the emergence that takes place between the film and the “work of the spectator”. *Autopoiesis* and emergence thus reinforce the pillars of a writing deemed post-dramatic, in which the moment of writing, of reading, of the scene and of visibility acquires a live and pulsating flow between bodies, media and the apprehension of the event. There is no prior plot; nor an *a posteriori* meaning that propels a symbolic interpretation. There is just the moment in which the writing, the scene and the image take place.

Peter Handke’s oeuvre, especially the first phase, materializes a broad project of intermedial¹⁰ dramaturgy. It is, then, a broad kind of writing, general, unrestricted, that does not establish hierarchy between different languages. In Handke, intermediality takes place less as a comparative, even analytical, process, and more as an aesthetic act, a kind of remediation¹¹, by which writing itself is reinvented by overcoming the limits between different materialities, media, languages and traditions of aesthetic expression. By identifying the collapse and the impotence of a realist project, Handke puts the writing at the frontier, and then, distant from *schemata* between characters, plots and pre-conceived drama, uncovers a powerful friction area. It is at the frontier that his writing (*écriture*) emerges. It is at the frontier that the tendencies and vices of a certain *literary* and *dramatic* writing fall apart. The filmic sentences, then, become the first transposition of a specific mediatic syntax, as is the case of cinema, the classic theater forms and the novel.

From then on, writing is no longer in crisis, but gets established between the mediatic borders of a crisis that points to new horizons. Writing between, within, by and against certain media has become an inherent challenge for any contemporary writer, and that's something that this first phase of Handke's oeuvre managed to translate with rare acumen.

Notes

- ¹ Peter Handke's work is featured on three Wim Wenders films. They are: *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty* (1971), *Wrong Movement* (1975) and *Wings of Desire* (1986). At the end of 2014, producer Paulo Branco announced the beginning of a collaboration with Wim Wenders for the adaptation of the play *The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez*, also written by Peter Handke. It is the fourth film yielded by the partnership. For bibliography about this collaboration, see Brady and Leal (2011), Malaguti (2008), Aventi (2004) and Buchka (1987).
- ² About the relationships between language games, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, and literature, see Perloff (1996). In an analysis of modern literature founded on parataxis and the grammar of language games, Perloff observes how certain German and Austrian writers such as Ingeborg Bachman, Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke, were influenced by Wittgenstein's concepts, with an aesthetic proposal aimed at creating sensorial meaning at the interval between his logical and poetic propositions.
- ³ At just over 22, Handke, invited by his editor Siegfried Unseld, attends a meeting of the *Gruppe 47* in Princeton, in the United States, and sparks controversy by calling out the writers and novelists gathered there as representatives of a writing ailing with descriptive impotence. Incisive, his criticism took over not just newspaper headlines and the pages of the literary magazines of the time, but it also led Handke to produce a series of essays, plays and public reflections that translate and interact with an extremely coherent aesthetic project, reflecting precisely the analytical jurisdiction of this paper. Most of those essays and materials related to the controversy can be found in Handke (1971a).
- ⁴ Handke makes some commentary on this relationship between orality and silence in his dramaturgy in sections of the four interviews given to Thomas Oberender. See Oberender (2014).

- ⁵ On the relationship between new German cinema and German public television see the introduction in Elsaesser (1989).
- ⁶ In parallel to his writing career, Peter Handke directed, since the 1970s, four feature films. They are: *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse*, *The left-handed woman* (1978), *Das Mal des Todes* (1985) and *Absence* (1993). About Handke's filmography, see Struck (2013).
- ⁷ More focused on analyzing silent film and the consolidation of the taxonomies dear to the language of classical film, Deleuze favors, in the concept of image-movement, the logics of meaning that historically were established between shots and frames. In them, time becomes an abstract element. See Deleuze (1985). In Handke's case, the movement is more physical, spatial and territorial and calls back to the subtle changes in dramaturgy, narrative and character.
- ⁸ *Bildungsromane* are works that incite movement upon the character and the reader. There is an external shift of the body in space and introspection by the protagonist, of the subject in historical time, or a geological, biological and psychological chronology. It was not by chance that the Wilhelm's practical learning in Goethe's novel bursts forth during a trip. In the timespan of a trajectory, therefore in between the departure, the path and a cycle without retreat, Wilhelm gets to know places, people and experience situations conducive to learning. Directly or indirectly, formation novels are connected to the experiences of individuals, characters and subjects.
- ⁹ Extensive and dynamic, the concept of *ekphrasis* stands as an aesthetic practice since Antiquity. It is a cross-language description of works of art, from visual to spoken, from writing to image. The debate about the *Ut pictura poesis*, in Lessing's *Laocoon*, is its most notorious instance. We hereby share an attempt to synthesize this concept by one of its most prominent scholars. "What generalizations are possible or plausible in the face of such poetic abundance? [...] I could begin by suggesting that they repeatedly display the basic features we have found permeating Ekphrasis from Homer onwards: the conversion of fixed pose and gesture into narrative, the prosopopoeial vocalization of the silent image, the sense of representational friction between signifying medium and subject signified, and overall the struggle for power – the *paragone* – between the image and the word" (Heffernan, 2004, p. 136). In our argumentation and interpretation, *ekphrasis* becomes an aesthetic bet that is essential to Handke's project and our guide into his intermedial dramaturgy.

- ¹⁰ On the difference between intermediality and intertextuality, we adopt the distinction made by Adalberto Müller, as he states: “Concerning the domain of intertextuality, the difference from intermediality studies lies, as I see it, in an important paradigm change from the last few years. The concept of intertextuality seems to be connected to a strain of thought, particularly French, derived from Saussurean linguistics, where the central paradigm is the significance relationship and the essential terms are the sign, the discourse, the text. I believe it is a paradigm essentially concerning matters of language, or even book culture. Now, for media theory, the book – and, consequently, everything that pertains the book, including literature – is just a stage of the history of media. Within this paradigm, neither the book, and, what’s more, not even language (not even the *linguistic turn* of Heidegger or Wittgenstein’s philosophy) occupy a central role” (Müller, 2012, p. 169-170).
- ¹¹ About the concept of *remediation*, see Bolter and Grusin (2000), especially the stages and processes of *Immediacy* and *Hypermediacy*, in which remediation is understood as a process of actualization, translation and transformation of media and the original sense.

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