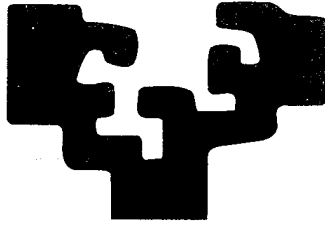


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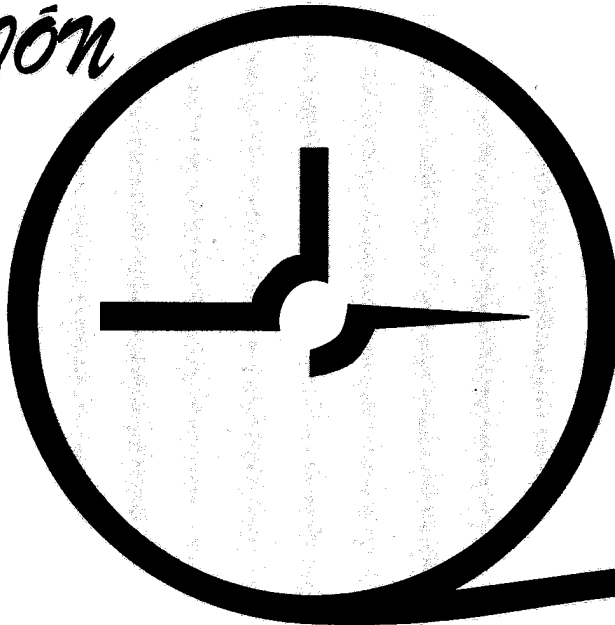
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DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA
INGELES ETA ALEMANIAR FILOLOGI SAILA

TRASVASES CULTURALES:
LITERATURA
CINE
TRADUCCIÓN

2



Eds.: J. M. Santamaría
Eterio Pajares
Vickie Olsen
Raquel Merino

Edita: FACULTAD DE FILOLOGIA
Dpto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Imprime: EVAGRAF, S. Coop.
Alibarra, 64 - Vitoria
D. L. VI - 187 - 1997
I.S.B.N. - 84-600-9413-8
Vitoria-Gasteiz 1997

**SCHINDLER'S LIST: FROM FACT TO FICTION,
FROM FICTION INTO FILM.
(A CASE OF CONSECUTIVE TRANSLATION)**

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“Writers,’ she mused. ‘Does anybody else cause as much trouble, in the long run? But I can tell you what my father would say: Writers don’t cause trouble so much as they describe it. Once it is described, trouble takes on a life visible to all, whereas until it is described, and made visible, only a few are able to see it.’”

Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we shall analyse some of the various relationships which can be found between Thomas Keneally’s novel¹ *Schindler’s Ark* (1982) and Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* (1993). We shall also discuss their reliance on facts, and, in each case, we shall come closer to both novel and film by examining minutely the way writer and director begin their works. To conclude we shall relate both novel and film to Herbert Steinhouse’s journalistic account of the events that took place during and after World War II². His informants were people close to Oskar Schindler and, more importantly, Schindler himself, whose testimony could not be incorporated by the other two authors because Schindler had already died when they began their investigations.

Other than studying the novel in the first place, paying particular attention to those aspects which may seem more relevant to its adaptation to the screen, and then analysing the film, especially in its relation to the novel, no further method will be followed³.

Before exploring these narratives in depth we should explain the title of this paper. The words *fact* and *film* do not seem to need further explanation. It is with the word *fiction*, when applied to Keneally’s work, that trouble starts to appear. In order to avoid confusion we shall refer to his work as “the novel”, a term which may raise the same problems as the initial one but which at least has a wider scope, since we can speak of a nonfiction novel. The other term that deserves some explanation is that of *consecutive translation*. To call the adaptation of a novel *translation* is something which should not surprise us⁴, and the adjective *consecutive* only emphasises the fact that there have been, at least, two levels of translation taking place one after the other, two consecutive transla-

tions, so to speak: firstly, Keneally translates the events told to him by Leopold Pfefferberg and others into the shape of a novel; secondly that story, together with other testimonies, is translated into a film by Steven Zaillian and Spielberg, screenwriter and director, respectively. The script could be another case of *consecutive translation*, but the way in which they worked, with Spielberg telling Zaillian where to expand and where to shorten the story⁵, and the fact that we are interested in the eventual product, the film, reinforce our idea of considering only the first two levels of translation. In fact, if, from a more simplistic viewpoint, we merely reflected upon the texts, we could eventually talk of just one level of translation, in which the novel, as we shall see, would perform the role of translator between fact and film.

FROM FACT TO NOVEL

We have already referred to the novel as *fiction* and already discredited the term: however, even *novel*, the term we intend to keep using in this paper, presents some problems. As Lanham (1995:43) puts it:

The cover of *Schindler's List* calls it a novel —a label that has occasioned considerable confusion. Actually, it's a carefully researched, true account that incorporates some of the storytelling devices of fiction.

Keneally calls it a "documentary novel," "a nonfiction novel," a "faction," and professes to be "astounded that people are so mystified about where it fits, given that you have had a number of famous American books that are in this genre, like *In Cold Blood* and *The Right Stuff* and *The Executioner's Song* and *The Armies of the Night*."

In the end, the label we may attach to the novel seems a matter of lesser importance⁶, since we know that it is based on actual facts. It seems more interesting to see how those facts are incorporated in the body of the work, for which purpose we shall focus now on the author and on some of the devices he uses to maintain the distance between fact and fiction.

The author of the novel, Thomas Keneally, is an Australian who trained for several years to become a Catholic priest but did not take final vows. He is also a political leader in an Australian party whose policy demands that Australia should become a Republic independent from the United Kingdom. We emphasize both facts for two different reasons. On the one hand, his being a Catholic distances him to a certain extent from Judaism, or rather, he is at a greater distance from the problem than the survivors and Spielberg, who is also a Jew. This fact would put Keneally closer to Schindler. On the other, his Republican ideas (in the Australian sense) could place him on the side of the Jews, since both claim a country of their own.

The novel consists of thirty-eight chapters, the author's note, a prologue and an epilogue. The story is told in a linear way, except for the prologue, which we shall see when analysing the beginnings of both book and film. The rest of the narrative includes few flashbacks. The overall idea of a group of people being saved links up with the main idea of the Old and New Testaments, especially with the former, where groups are *actually* formed from the beginning of time. Supporting this relationship to the Bible is the fact that Keneally, in his prologue, defines his book as⁷ "the pragmatic story of the triumph of good over evil"[15]. The book is dedicated "To the memory of Oskar Schindler, and to Leopold Pfefferberg who by zeal and persistence caused this book to be written"[7].

The book could be said to have three different beginnings, to which we have already referred. The first of them is the *Author's Note*, where Keneally explains how he came to know the story of Schindler and justifies himself for using a documentary novel style. Then comes the *Prologue*, where we find ourselves at a party in Goeth's house in the Autumn of 1943, that is, it starts *in media res*. This second beginning, however, functions only as a sort of anticipation of what is going to come, and the first chapter proper provides a brief summary of Schindler's and Goeth's childhood until the former becomes a collaborator of the Nazi party. The important thing about all this is that from the very beginning we know what happened and is about to be told, or rather, is already being told.

From that early chapter onwards Schindler will be repeatedly compared to Amon Goeth. In chapter twenty, for instance, we can read: "Amon was Oskar's dark brother"[188]. Each of the following chapters seems to rely on the accounts of the various witnesses, including fifty Schindler survivors, from whose viewpoint the story is focalised. Their testimonies build a corpus of different voices which contribute to the accuracy of the story. In this way, perhaps the most outstanding device used by Keneally is his conscious differentiation between for example what has been "documented"[43], what "is most likely"[21], and what is part of the "legend"[376]. Therefore, in Keneally's story it is possible to distinguish between what is fact and what may be fiction.

FROM NOVEL INTO FILM

It is always difficult to talk of an *author*, especially if we observe the different levels that several schools give to this term⁸. Even if we do not take those theories into account, the *author* of a film proves too complicated a matter. For our purposes, we prefer to talk of the person who is responsible for the final outcome —the film—, the person in charge, as it were. In the present case there is no doubt that that person is the director, Steven Spielberg, with the outstanding help of screenwriter Steven Zaillian and director of photography

Janusz Kaminski. The relevant point to be made about the director is his Jewishness, which is present in most, if not all, the interviews he has given about the film⁹. However, in spite of this—which would imply a more subjective treatment of what happened—Spielberg chooses to tell the story of a so-called “good German”. This apparent contradiction leads us to think that apart from, or rather, together with Schindler’s story there is another one which the director reminds us of, which is of course the Holocaust.

As for the film itself, it must be said that it follows the pattern of the novel, that is, while telling the main story we are allowed to see what is happening behind it. Apart from the devices that are commented upon by most critics, that is, the use of black and white photography—except in very few moments where colour appears—and of hand-held cameras, there is still another one which deserves some consideration: the use of cross-cutting. It is present throughout the film and it is mainly used to show parallelisms, for example when Oskar occupies the apartment of a Jewish family which we see being relocated, or the scene in which we can see Oskar in a club, the wedding of a Jewish couple, and the interview-monologue of Helen Hirsch by Amon Goeth. Parallelism within a shot is also used to compare Goeth and Schindler, as for example in that mirror-like scene in which they talk, sitting face to face.

Before analysing the way in which the film begins I would like to focus on something that may be considered extra-filmic, but which is the first thing that we are most likely to see even before entering the auditorium: the film poster. The overall image shows two arms which hold hands together: the one on top is big and bare, whereas the bottom one is partially covered by a red sleeve which contrasts with the rest of the picture, depicted in sepia tones. The bare arm is completely illuminated, but the sleeve, and the small arm within it, disappear into the pitch darkness of the lower part of the poster. All this is seen through a difficult-to-read list of names and figures which very much resembles the “list” to which the film title refers. The poster therefore tells the spectator to look beyond the list, to where the unimaginable must happen. We shall not discuss if the big hand is Schindler’s or not, but what seems clear is that the other one must belong to the child in red, a figure which is emphasised in both novel and film. Nevertheless, the poster stands for something that does not happen in the film: no hand can be seen holding the child’s, the one who eventually died. The poster shows an adult holding one of the millions of hands that did not survive the Holocaust, a hand that comes from *The Unbearable, The Unwatchable, from Horror and Death*. In the film those six million people are not explicitly recalled until its very end. The *child in red* can be seen in a couple of scenes in the film. The first one takes place while the Jews are forced to leave the ghetto and Schindler is watching this with one of his mistresses, both riding horses. As viewers we share Schindler’s view in that shot that is remarkably similar to the ones taken from Goeth’s terrace when he is shooting individuals at random, in

what constitutes another example of the use of comparisons and parallelisms in the film. The other scene in which the little girl appears shows her among piles of dead people.

The most striking formal device used by the film is its title: the film, far more than the novel, is full of scenes and shots in which we can see files of people either in ink or in the flesh. All those are opposed to the only one file, the only list that *is life*: Schindler's. Louis Giannetti's words (1996:29) on the use of wide-angle lenses by Spielberg links their overwhelming presence:

Wide-angle lenses are used whenever deep-focus photography is called for. Objects a few feet from the lens as well as those in the "depth" of the background are in equal focus, reinforcing the interconnectedness of the visual planes. Deep-focus photography tends to be objective, matter-of-fact, unromantic. The foreground is not necessarily more important than the mid- or background. [...] Because deep focus allows for the repetition of visual motifs into infinity, Spielberg is able to suggest that Jews all over Europe were being herded in a similar manner, but their fate was not so lucky as Schindler's Jews.

The film, unlike the novel, starts in a more mysterious, and perhaps conventional, way. As with the book, we could talk of three beginnings. The first sequence is in colour and, in this way, it is linked with the final one, in which real survivors, actors, and actresses pay their tribute to Schindler's tomb. Both sequences function as a framework for the rest of the film. The first thing we see is, nevertheless, nothing, only the darkness of the lower part of the poster and the momentary darkness of the shower scene, darkness which speaks for itself. After darkness comes light in the shape of a match, held by an anonymous hand, which *transmits* that light to several candles. At the end of the sequence, after we have seen some Jewish people celebrating the Sabbath, only one light remains and it softly goes out, its smoke turned into black and white, more black than white, like the smoke of the train in the next shot. Both scenes, the one with the candle and the one at the train station, foretell the smoke that we shall see coming out of the chimney of a crematorium where Jews are being incinerated. But by now we only see the first instances of lists, full of names and faces. Those lists are opposed to the mysterious presentation of Schindler in the following two sequences, which stand for our third beginning. In the first of them we catch glimpses of someone who can choose between various expensive clothes and jewellery to dress himself. In the end we find out from the pin in his sleeve that he is a Nazi. His face and his name will not be known to us until well into the following sequence. In fact, he is not known to anybody in the club that he goes to. We first see his face and eventually get to know his name: Schindler. In between both moments there is a shot in which we see him from the point of view of the maitre, who is asking his waiters if anybody knows the man.

anybody knows the man. That shot presents Schindler under a cross formed by the frames of a window, a symbol that relates him to the Catholic world. From what we have just seen and what we saw when analysing the novel, we can conclude that, in spite of beginning their stories in such different ways, both novelist and director manage to follow the same threefold structural pattern and to eventually tell a very similar story, the former stating the facts from the beginning, the latter creating a mystery.

The novel logically provides us with many more *details* than the film. Among those details which are missing in the film is the relation of Schindler to the resistance movement, which, in the novel, presents him not only as an individual saviour but also as part of a group. In the novel, there are also accounts of particularly cruel torture —dogs eating persons [204] and the flogging of one by another of different nationalities [280]— which the film does not dare to show. There is only one addition in the film which has been strongly criticised, even by the author of the book: the scene, at the end of the film, in which Schindler thinks of the few more people he could have saved. The director (in Thompson 1995:73) is very clear on this point:

“It was absolutely necessary,” insists Spielberg. “He’s not speaking for himself, he’s speaking for all of us, what we might do someday.”

We agree with Spielberg on this point because in this manner he achieves the *cathartic* effect which is one of the conventions of drama and film. On the whole, we can say that the *spirit* that we find in Keneally’s novel is maintained throughout the film.

A CASE OF CONSECUTIVE TRANSLATION

So far we have not referred to Herbert Steinhouse’s account of the story. It is included in Thomas Fensch’s *Oskar Schindler and His List* (1995), although it had been written more than thirty years before. The overall story coincides with both novel and film, especially as far as Schindler is concerned, since this is a journalistic account of *his* story: in that sense this account comes closer to the film than to the novel. Understandably, the figure of Goeth does not appear at all in Steinhouse’s article. What does appear is the fact that Schindler decided that they should “have to get rid of the local SS commander” (Steinhouse 1995:33). It can be argued that Schindler did not commit that crime himself and that they did it in self-defence, but we would be using the same arguments as the Nazis themselves.

Whatever the truth about that last episode, the important thing is that both novel and film do not differ much from that early account of Schindler’s story. It is noteworthy that the film should come closer to Steinhouse’s article than the novel itself. In fact, as Anne Thompson (1995:67) puts it, even before Keneally

had taken any interest in the story, Leopold Pfefferberg himself had tried to sell it to Hollywood:

Page [Leopold Pfefferberg] had first helped sell Schindler's story to MGM in the 1960s. The studio hired *Casablanca* croscreenwriter Howard Koch to work on the film, but the dubious character of Oskar Schindler—a womanizing, boozing bear of a man who profited from the war by employing Jews—may have made his story a difficult sell. The project was dropped and lay dormant for years before Spielberg decided to take it on.

Page, 80, insists that from their first meeting, Spielberg knew he would do the movie. "When I met him," he recalls in thickly accented English, "I asked him, 'Please, when are you starting?' He said, 'Ten years from now.'" But as those years passed, Page worried that he wouldn't live to see the film.

"*Schindler's* was on my guilty conscience," says Spielberg. "Page was heaping on the fact that he was going to die."

Besides, not until the release of the film was Steinhouse able to sell *his* story.¹⁰

Taking all this into account and also the fact that all three storytellers follow the same system in their investigations—firstly relying on a former story told to them by someone and then interviewing many witnesses who in some cases coincide—it can be said that it is nothing but facts that have been transmitted, *translated*, although in very different shapes, in very different *languages*. Spielberg (in Ansen 1995:64) himself argues that "I came to realize, the reason I came to make the movie is that I have never in my life told the truth in a movie. [...] That was one of the things I thought: if I'm going to tell the truth for the first time, it should be about this subject." With this we do not want to diminish Keneally's novel. On the contrary, its value is twofold, as the excellent book that it is and as the mediator that it turned out to be.

It can therefore be concluded that the translation of facts is fully achieved in both novel and film and that the novel has functioned as a translator between fact and film.

* I would like to thank Professor Peter W. Evans for his comments on this article.

NOTES

¹ Hereafter referred to as *Schindler's List*, since this is the title that came with the copy of the book that we have been using or our commentary. Besides, the novel, when published in the United States of America, —something that did not happen until the release of the film—, was already distributed with that same title.

² Steinhouse, H. (1995), "The Man Who Saved a Thousand Lives", in Fensch (1995:20-35).

³ Although no specific method is followed, I cannot deny being *influenced* by the *polysystem* theory of Patrick Cattrysse (see for example Cattrysse 1994) and the model of textual analysis stated by Jesús González Requena in for example González Requena (1995:13-45).

⁴ See for example Bussi Parmiggiani (1994:105).

⁵ See Thompson (1995:68-69).

⁶ Perhaps the most surprising point in this discussion is that the novel was awarded the 1982 Booker Prize, a prize that is given only to works of fiction.

⁷ When quoting from the novel we shall state the page number(s) that we are referring to between square brackets []. The edition from which we are quoting is the one included in the bibliography.

⁸ See for example Branigan (1992:86-124).

⁹ See Fensch (1995), in which we can find many instances of this point, either in direct interviews with the director or in quotations from previous declarations which the different critics incorporate in their articles.

¹⁰ See Fensch, T. (1995), "The Journalist Who Knew Oskar Schindler: An Interview with Herbert Steinhouse", in Fensch (1995:16-17).

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