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Ekphrasis, intersemiotic translation, and transmediality in *The Name of the Rose*: from novel to film, graphic novel, and TV series

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Abstract: This article investigates a textual mechanism in Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose* linked to ekphrasis, in order to highlight how literary writing produces various visual, auditory, and kinesthetic effects that mimic a cinematic effect. In my hypothesis, these effects, linked to the poetic nature and iconicity (Greimas, Algirdas J. 1984. Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique [Figurative semiotics and plastic semiotics]. *Actes sémiotiques. Documents* 60. 1–24) of an aesthetic work, can be interpreted and translated intersemiotically. This happens in different but effective ways in the 1986 film directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud *The Name of the Rose* and in a 2023 graphic novel based on the novel and illustrated by Milo Manara, likewise titled *The Name of the Rose*. Through a comparison of Eco's novel and the 2019 TV series *The Name of the Rose*, directed by Giacomo Battiato, I will demonstrate how derivative texts can reopen the narrative structures of the original novel, unlocking its potential and creating new narrative paths that utilize transmediality.

Keywords: adaptation; intersemiotic translation; ekphrasis; transmediality; *The Name of the Rose*

1 Introduction

This article investigates a textual mechanism in Umberto Eco's 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose* linked to ekphrasis, in order to highlight how literary writing produces various visual, auditory, and kinesthetic effects that mimic a cinematic effect. In my hypothesis, these effects, linked to the poetic nature and "figurativity" (or gradual iconicity) (Greimas 1984) of an aesthetic work, can be interpreted and translated intersemiotically. This happens in different but effective ways in the 1986 film

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directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud *The Name of the Rose* and in a 2023 graphic novel based on the novel and illustrated by Milo Manara, likewise titled *Il nome della rosa* [The Name of the Rose]. Through a comparison of Eco's novel and the 2019 TV series *The Name of the Rose*, directed by Giacomo Battiato, I will demonstrate how derivative texts can reopen the narrative structures of the original novel, unlocking its potential and creating new narrative paths that utilize transmediality.

What we explore are some possible paths of semiotic relations, or the "semiotic literariness" of a novel (Kroó and Torop 2018: 144), understood as a poetic textual construction, and those "extratextual" translations that translate and re-semanticize it with other expressive means in the perspective of a "cultural intersemiosis" or "intersemioticity" (Torop 2023: 34–35).[1] This is just one of the possible approaches from an intersemiotic and transmedial perspective to the complexity of a postmodern novel with a complex narrative world such as Eco's, which we have addressed in the recent edited volume *Il meme della rosa* [The Rose Meme] (Dusi and Eugeni 2025a) published in Italy in 2025.

In the current "post-media fragmentation" (Eugeni 2015; my translation), with the boundaries between media becoming increasingly blurred by the digital revolution of the late 20th century (as early as 2001, Manovich spoke of "post-media aesthetics"),[2] a rigid and univocal methodology does not allow us to analyze the interpretative and translational transformations of a literary text (Kroó 2023). A novel opens up into a network of culturally very diverse media products: some derived directly through intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959),[3] others only partially related in an intertextual (Genette 1982) or intermedial dialogue (Rajewski 2005),[4] and yet others linked through the storyworld in transmedia ways (Jenkins 2011).[5]

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1 Kourdis (2021: 11) discusses "intersemioticity" as a phenomenon of communication, such as (among others) "the transmutation/transposition of the semiotic system of the language to a multimodal semiotic system (theatre, film, television, internet, etc.)".

2 According to Manovich (2001, 2013), digital culture emphasizes remixing and reinterpreting cultural texts and practices, influencing creation and consumption strategies. Manovich advocates replacing the concept of medium with new categories based on information technology and computational concepts (such as information, data, interface, and the software used by the author and reader, shaping the kinds of texts created).

3 For a definition of intersemiotic translation in the terms discussed in this article, see Dusi (2000, 2015); Eco (2000, 2001, 2003).

4 According to Rajewsky (2005: 46), intermediality can also be understood as working on intersections between media, thanks to sociocultural practices that construct hybrid configurations, in an incessant "crossing of borders between media".

5 Note Jenkins' (2011: 1) definition of "transmedia storytelling": "the further development of the storyworld [i.e. the narrative world] through each new medium".

I will briefly discuss these different approaches throughout the article, because I would like the translation methods to emerge through an analysis of individual media products whose textuality is derived from or related to the novel *The Name of the Rose*. Transmedia research thus opens up to interdisciplinary approaches, where different areas of knowledge and tools are useful for highlighting similarities and differences between media texts.

Around (or alongside) *The Name of the Rose*, we find a hybrid media universe in which discourses and derivative texts construct coexistence, negotiations, and conflicts, amid quotations, ekphrasis, translations or adaptations, reworkings, and expansions. The various media products based on Eco's novel, including films, TV series, radio series (Perrotta 2025), graphic novels, and video games (Salvador 2025), fit into this perspective, becoming part of an interpretative and translational chain between texts, discourses, and media – a chain that in the suggested approach of cultural semiotics (Lotman 1984, 1990; Torop 1995) is defined as a "transmedial semiosphere". Saldre and Torop (2012) reinterpret the transmigration of content between different media, i.e., transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006), through the differences between "text space, media space, and cultural space" (Saldre and Torop 2012: 40): the space of culture thus becomes a space of translation at different levels and across multiple systems, as it is simultaneously the space of intersemiotic translation between texts (or between different sign systems), that of discursive practices in reciprocal translation, and that of intermedial and transmedial relations.

In recent media studies, a term derived from studies on generative artificial intelligence neural networks is 'latent space': an abstract and multidimensional space "in which deep-learning algorithms turn digital objects (e.g., the vast quantities of images and texts uploaded to the internet) into latent representations for processing and generating new digital objects (e.g., new images and new texts)" (Somaini 2023: 77). In a latent space, a source text "is reduced to a series of basic elements used to produce a potentially infinite number of variants, characterized by their position at a vector distance of similarity or difference more or less pronounced with respect to the source text itself"; these variants "can in turn introduce new characteristics that trigger new generative possibilities" (Dusi and Eugeni 2025b: 12; my translation).

To explore the transmedia semiosphere and the historical and cultural "latent space" that has developed around *The Name of the Rose*, published in 1980 and translated worldwide, in this article I will focus on the use of ekphrasis in the novel and its translations in the 1986 film of the same title directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud and in the graphic novel illustrated by Milo Manara (published in Italy in 2023). And I will take as a final example the transposition of the TV miniseries *The Name of the Rose* released in 2019 (produced by Rai Fiction and Palomar). I will omit all paratextual material, except for Eco's preparatory drawings for the novel, published

in Italy in 2020 in a new edition of the novel.[6] Indeed, as Marrone (2025) points out, Eco was the first to expand his novel into paratextual or epitextual products (Genette 1982). Not only did Eco (1983) open the first pages of his novel with his own drawing of the map of the abbey where the story takes place, but a few years later he published a critical examination of the construction of the novel, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (Eco 1984 [1983]). The novel, therefore, "provides its own instructions for use" (Marrone 2025: 236; my translation), even though Eco is ready to impose limits on his role because, at the beginning he states: "A narrator should not supply interpretations of his own work: otherwise he would not have written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations" (Eco 1984 [1983]: 1).

Eco's drawings feature sketches and caricatures alongside the names of monks, but also many objects and actions from everyday medieval life, which Eco had researched for previous works. These become the starting point for the construction of the figurative (iconic) world of the graphic novel, as its illustrator Manara (2025) points out. Manara draws inspiration from drawings of monks for their physiognomy, and takes some ideas from Eco's drawings for life in the abbey and some precise iconic instructions on objects of medieval material culture, such as the Benedictine monks' worktables or the large cabinets in the abbey library.

My suggested approach is to place the chain of these transpositions, rewritings, and paratexts within a broad media ensemble, a "media ecosystem" (Pescatore 2018) or, as already mentioned, a "transmedia semiosphere" (Saldre and Torop 2012). This ensemble should be understood as a field of forces between two major polarities: on the one hand, an intertextual, intersemiotic, and intermedial *continuity* with a translational nature; on the other, a transmedial *discontinuity* due to the specificities of each medium, the anticipation of its new model readers (Eco 1979) and new audiences, the narrative extensions (Jenkins 2006) proposed by TV miniseries, through to interactive videogame textuality and web prosumer remixes, which I will not deal with here (Dusi 2014).

2 Intertextuality and ekphrasis in the novel

It is impossible to convey the complexity of Umberto Eco's first novel except through small samples of it. I will do so with a reflection on *ekphrasis* and the plurality of explicit or hidden quotations in a specific part of the text. Marmo (2025: 68–71) discusses the "external" and "internal" intertextuality of the novel. While Genette (1997 [1982]: 1–2) defines intertextuality as "the relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts," which can be expressed as the practices of

6 Umberto Eco. 2020. *Il nome della rosa* [The Name of the Rose]. Milano: La nave di Teseo.

"quoting, plagiarism, and allusion," Marmo focuses primarily on explicit or hidden quotations. External intertextuality is linked to descriptions of architecture, objects, and books that exist in the real world, such as the description of the abbey portal, inspired by that of the Abbey of Moissac in southern France; or the numerous miniatures, especially apocalyptic ones, observed on several occasions by Adso of Melk (the young monk who assists William of Baskerville, and who, as an old man, is the narrator of the novel).

Internal intertextuality is linked to Eco's own research and publications, such as those for his university degree thesis, which led him to discover authors and texts that later reappeared in other academic publications, such as his article on the development of medieval aesthetics (Eco 1959) and many others. Among the thousands of quotations, allusions, or implicit references to ancient or modern texts in the novel, Marmo recalls that Eco quotes invectives and speeches by medieval scholars in his characters' dialogues. For example, the blind librarian Jorge of Burgos, in his first discussion about laughter with William of Baskerville, "responds to William's defense of bizarre *marginalia* with Bernardo of Chiaravalle's invective against the Cluniac gothic style [with sensual deformities] designed to distract monks from prayer" (Marmo 2025: 70; my translation). By contrast, for William of Baskerville's dialogues, Eco enjoyed constructing a "playful-parodic hybridization program" between the ancient and the modern, with quotations from Roger Bacon, Marsilio da Padova, and Ockham, alongside Wittgenstein and Peirce (Marmo 2025: 71). According to Marmo, quotation thus becomes a pragmatic textual strategy in the novel, aimed at producing negotiation between the implicit author and reader of the effects of authenticity in a story – which, incidentally, is a fictional story that mimics historical narrative.

With regard to external intertextuality, Marmo recalls the lengthy ekphrasis of the abbey portal, to which Eco devotes approximately six pages in the novel. It is a description of a work of art, in the classical tradition, but written in a style that is not serious but, rather, "passionate" (Marmo 2025: 73). There is, in fact, an effect of immersion into the medieval world, using the poetics of lists, enumeration, and excess, through the accumulation of lists of names and animals (many taken from medieval bestiaries [Marmo 1990]) – an effect that overwhelms both Adso, who is looking at the portal, and the reader. It is a functional description for the narrative because it creates a pathetic (i.e., emotional) construction of the character who prepares for the encounter with the monstrous monk (Salvatore), passing "from jubilation to terror, to the catharsis of understanding" (Marmo 2025: 73; my translation).

According to Baxandall (2003), ekphrasis fundamentally describes the experience of someone looking at a work of art, rather than the work itself. In *Mouse or Rat?* Eco (2003) reminds us that literary ekphrasis is a descriptive discourse that

effectively places the object before our eyes and allows for various cognitive, emotional, and narrative functions. Eco argues for leading "the language to 'stage' something that the reader is virtually led to *see*" (2001: 51; emphasis in the text) because he believes that hypotyposis and ekphrasis can open up dialogue, irony, and intertextual echoes.

The classical function of ekphrasis was "explicit" explains Eco (2003: 111), while that of modern and contemporary literature is more often "occult". For Eco, the latter "aims at evoking in the mind of the reader a vision, as precise and evident as possible" (2003: 111). Both the descriptions of the illuminated manuscripts and the description of the cathedral portal in *The Name of the Rose* belong to this second type: it is a 'philological décor', as to say "an attempt to reconstruct the visual atmosphere of that historical moment" (Eco 2003: 111), that Eco later revealed to be a description of the portal of the church of Moissac inspired by the Apocalypse, and (perhaps also) of the devils on the capitals of the church of Conques. In narrative terms, ekphrasis can delay and expand the story, or even characterize a character or situation. This is what happens to the young monk Adso da Melk, who in the third chapter of *The Name of the Rose* is seduced and disturbed by the horrible and at times obscene images on the church portal, which dazzle his gaze as he immerses himself in the vision, at the sixth hour of his first day at the abbey (Eco [1980] 1984: 28–31).

The communicative effectiveness of Eco's ekphrasis is achieved through elements linked to vision, light, and spatiality. Steeped in classical and religious studies, Adso sees and interprets images – for the reader's benefit – both literally and, at once, allegorically, grasping their parabolic power and moral teaching. Yet the vision deeply disturbs him, and indeed causes him to have a mystical experience, leading him to believe that he has a general intuition about what is happening at the abbey.

In the novel, the description follows Adso's gaze, shifting from top to bottom and then back up the sides. The ambient light plays a decisive role in allowing the portal to be deciphered: it is midday on a clear November day, and after describing the structure of the façade, Eco adds an explicit reference to the light:

> led the gaze, as if into the heart of an abyss, toward the doorway itself, crowned by a great tympanum […]. At that hour of the day the weak sun was beating almost straight down on the roof and the light fell obliquely on the façade without illuminating the tympanum; so after passing the two columns, we found ourselves abruptly under the almost sylvan vault […]. When our eyes had finally grown accustomed to the gloom, the silent speech of the carved stone, accessible as it immediately was to the gaze and the imagination of anyone […] dazzled my eyes and plunged me into a vision […]. (Eco [1980] 1984: 28)

In the novel, the description that follows the situation seems ordinary: two monks entering the abbey church for the first time, and yet, through the sunlight, Adso and William's advance into the shadow of the portal, their eyes adjusting, the revelation

of the illustrated portal is a sudden vision that catches them unprepared. The same ekphrastic description passes through a dense network of references to brightness, before reaching Adso's cognitive enlightenment, or recognition, that is, his discovery that the portal narrates divine wrath and can be linked to the bloody events that have just taken place in the abbey. In the description of the figures glimpsed by Adso, there are a series of adjectives that seem to construct, among other things, an "isotopy" of light.[7] Not only does it permeate vision, but as brightness it can also be interpreted (in the narrator's interpretation, permeated with exegesis of medieval sacred texts) as one of the attributes of perfection and beauty. But brightness is also a metaphor for God the creator, according to medieval aesthetics (Eco 1959).

The perceptual dimension enriches the narrative focus of a subjective description (Genette 1972), i.e., from the observer's point of view. The ekphrasis of the novel seeks synesthetic outcomes, and in the finale, Adso's visual description shifts, changing sensory channels and becoming auditory, when in his mystical vision he hears trumpet blasts and the peremptory voice of Christ. In the vertigo that overwhelms him, perceptual and sensory experiences become emotional upsets or "pathetic" clues (Greimas and Fontanille 1991). Adso swings between states of wonder and terror, amazement and dismay, and finally has a mystical vision in which he sees Christ holding a sickle to reap with and hears a powerful voice urging him to write down what he is watching. This vision leads him to synthesize (in his mind or in the narrator's memory of the experience) a sequence of moving images, or rather – we might venture to say – audiovisual images. The ekphrasis of the portal is therefore an assemblage of figures in space, guided by luminous clues and flashes of color, which produces powerful emotional effects. Adso embarks on a cognitive journey that leads to a premonition of the carnage that will take place in the abbey. At the same time, he experiences an emotional journey that ends with a return to his own sensory experience: "I trembled, as if I were drenched by the icy winter rain" (Eco [1980] 1984: 31).

Thanks to the fast pace of the story, Adso's immersive experience through the senses and emotions is also experienced by the reader, or at least that is the aim of the ekphrastic description. The texture of quotations in the portal description was investigated in the meticulous notes to a critical edition of the novel by Marmo (1990: 511–513). The description is based primarily on the subtext of the *Apocalypse of John*, but then the list of implicit quotations explodes into an intertextual dialogue with medieval authors such as Augustine, Hucbald of St Amand, Boethius, Honorius of Autun, William of Conches, Alan of Lille, and Albertus Magnus, and the names of the animals are taken from the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* [The book of

7 Textual isotopy consists of a series of semantic repetitions found in the text (Greimas and Courtés 1979), which according to Eco (1979) create an instruction for interpretation.

monsters of different kinds] and others including *The Cambridge Bestiary*. I would only point out that in Eco's story, the shift from the dominant sensory mode from visual to auditory is also a reprise of the textual mechanism that appears in the "Introductory Vision" of the *Apocalypse of John*.

In the section dedicated to "Adaptations say too little", in his book *Mouse or Rat?*, Eco (2003: 163) explains the problem of the movement of vision created by hypotyposis in the *Apocalypse of John*, and teaches us that the first miniaturists (the "Mozarabic illuminators") were unable to visually translate the source text, i.e., to represent the complex and contradictory movement described in the apocalyptic vision – an impossibility given their "cultural encyclopedia" (Eco 1984). Today, by contrast, this dreamlike sequence, where things are in constant transformation would be possible because dreams are more similar to movies than to [static] miniatures. In a film-like vision, the creatures can wheel and appear simultaneously on, in front of, and around the throne (Eco 2003: 165).

3 The intersemiotic translation of Annaud's film

The semiotic aspects of literature we have introduced thus far lead us to the intersemiotic translation of Annaud's film, the result of a process of translation and reinterpretation of Eco's novel. Due to its medium-specific characteristics, in some sequences Annaud's film manages to offer precisely these dreamlike visions.

Before analyzing the film, I would like to focus on some theoretical definitions. An "intersemiotic translation" is a translational and interpretative relationship between two semiotic systems that have different purport and substance of expression.[8] I therefore interpret Jakobson's well-known definition (which he also calls "transmutation"): "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs from nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson 1959: 261). Intersemiotic translation should initially be understood as the transfer of similar content from a first text to a second text, and can also take place without purely linguistic mediation, even though our case study is always linked to the novel as the source text. Furthermore, an intersemiotic translation takes place not between signs but between texts (i.e., systems of signification): it is a dynamic process that has no predefined norms and should be understood as an internal system of choices of content and expression of a target text in dialogue with a source text.

8 My reinterpretation, based on Hjelmslev's glossematics (1943), stems from discussions with Eco published in an issue of versus dedicated to intersemiotic translation (Dusi and Nergaard 2000), partly taken up again in various works by Eco (2001; 2003) and by Dusi (2003, 2015).

According to Calabrese (1987, 2000), visual aesthetic texts, particularly paintings and films, undergo self-determining processes to create their own local structures of meaning and become autonomous. We could say the same about all aesthetic texts. Therefore, translation can be theorized only locally and not globally, as a textual and individual phenomenon. And intersemiotic translation becomes "a transfer of content from a source text to a target text by means of (local) structures of stylistic equivalence" (Calabrese 2000: 107; my translation).

While translatability is always possible at the content level, intersemiotic translation is affected by differences in the expression purport and expression substance. Simplifying Hjelmslev (1943),[9] I mean the different materials and different meanings (or individual choices) with which something is communicated. Every time a raw material (an "expression purport") becomes recognizable (becoming "expression substance"), an expression form is born, but it is comprehensible only because it is conventionally linked to a content form. The expression form and the content form are the codes at work in the construction of textual meaning. It is precisely in this sense that Metz (1971) refers to semiotics of cinema and the relationship between novels and films. Moving on from Hjelmslev, I will then give a more accurate definition of intersemiotic translation, which occurs "when there is a reformulation, in one or more semiotic systems with different expression purport and expression substance, of a content form intersubjectively recognized as linked, at one or more levels of relevance, to the content form of a source text" (Dusi 2000: 8, my translation, 2015: 184).

It is therefore a process of recognizing a connection between texts by an interpreter (an individual, a community, a culture) who identifies lines of continuity between (at least) one source product and (at least) one target product. In my definition, we can talk about translation even if only a part or a textual level is transferred from one text to another, for example a dominant "thematic isotopy" (Greimas and Courtés 1979), that is, a theme that becomes a guideline in the text. Or when to be transformed is a recognizable figure from the world of storytelling, such as characters (with their iconic, thematic, and ideological characteristics), or even just a narrative structure.

This is why we focused on the isotopies of light and knowledge in the description of the portal in the novel, because we find them in the transposition of Annaud's film. There is therefore intersemiotic translation even in the case of certain portions of a source text that are reproduced in a target text, with differences due to a different

9 Hjelmslev's glossematic (1943, 1954) rewrites De Saussure's linguistic approach (1906–1911) proposes that a sign is as an entity constructed by the relationship between a *signifier* and a *signified*, and the sign relationship is stratified into a *level of expression* (expression purport, expression substance, expression form), and a *level of content* (content purport, content substance and content form).

level of expression. I was saying that we need to think of translation as a dynamic process, in which relationships of meaning are selected and activated. In semiotic terms, this means examining "the system of relationships between the two levels (content and expression) in the source text" (Dusi 2000: 8, my translation), and attempting to reproduce it appropriately in the relationship between the two levels of the target text (Dusi 2015: 185), as also argued by Torop (1995, 2023: 32).[10] As an example of "content forms" (or codes) in the translational relationship between two texts, I am thinking of discursive genres, narrative structures, and character construction (Metz 1971). While by "expression forms" in a film I mean, for example, the codes of editing (*montage*) and the intertwining between images and sounds (voices, noises, music), in an often conflicting relationship. The stylistic choices of the film obviously shape both levels. In an intersemiotic translation, as Torop (2023) explains in reinterpreting Jakobson (1959), two processes are therefore always taking place: "transposition, tied to the content plane, and recoding, linked to the expression plane. While these planes can be independently translated, the essence of translation lies in maintaining or intentionally altering the relationship between them" (Torop 2023: 32).

Annaud's film works by selecting and eliminating the great discursive and enunciative complexity of the novel, linked, for example, to learned theological and philosophical discussions, and chooses to expand and "visualize" (Stam 2005) certain narrative lines considered more appealing to the mainstream audience. The narrative isotopy that stands out is the detective story, but I also note the figurative invention, compared to the novel, of scenes of torture and the burning of alleged heretics (Dusi 2020). The romantic isotopy also expands, linked to the erotic relationship between the young Adso and the peasant girl, whose name we will never know, and whose narrative line expands. The girl meets Adso several times in the film, starting from his arrival at the Abbey, and not only does she escape the pyre to which she is condemned by the inquisitor, but she is even able to see Adso again for a final farewell on the day of his departure.

The sequence linked to the description of the portal and Adso's ecstatic experience is anticipated in the film by a scene in which Adso watches in horror as blood gushes out while he hears the loud squealing of a pig being slaughtered, and details of the guts of the killed animal are shown. Then William and Adso meet Ubertino da Casale, a mystic who frightens Adso by telling him that the devil is roaming the Abbey. This premise will help us understand Adso's reactions to seeing the portal, which in the film takes place on the second day, rather than the first as in the novel,

10 See also Badir (2013), who reopens the topic, on the basis of the stratification proposed by Hjelmslev (1953).

and only after the discovery of Venanzio's corpse and its dissection by William and the herbalist Severinus.

The tympanum above the church entrance is brightly lit, albeit with a cold light. The camera frames the scene with a wide shot and a slight dolly shot from top to bottom, where we see Adso, alone, admiring the sculptures and bas-reliefs. Little is visible of the faded marble, but beneath three large, decorated arches, the pediment features a larger central figure surrounded by three rows of smaller figures arranged in three horizontal bands: bishops and saints in various poses reminiscent of those depicted on the portal described in the novel. Two elongated figures decorating the side columns of the pediment and a central column with animal figures also remain from the descriptions in the novel. The tympanum with the elders of the Apocalypse, the lintel decorated with rosettes, the dividing pillar with its tangle of monsters, connected at the sides by the long figures of the apostles and saints, are a copy of the main portal of the Romanesque church of Saint Pierre de Moissac, the portal that inspired Eco in his description. There is therefore a source text, or at least a reference text, on which the novel and the film converge, but the view of the pediment allowed by the brief initial shot is too quick and, as viewers, we are too far away to be able to appreciate it.

Adso then enters the arcade, and the light becomes chiaroscuro: it comes from outside, while inside the light is dim. In the Medium shot, the boy is often only half-lit, and begins to look at figures representing death and various deformed beings. In the portal above, we see many faces of the condemned and dying, and a series of skulls in the background. Adso, filmed in a medium shot, looks up and down, initially pleasantly surprised. The effects of light, between shadows and chiaroscuro, create disturbing patterns and reliefs on the monstrous faces. The sound of the wind can be heard ominously, blowing through the boy's hair, and in the background there is the sound of large drops falling due to the humidity, as if inside a cave. The shot alternates between Adso's subjective point of view and close-ups of sculpted faces, and objective shots from behind the columns or from above, which seem to surround the boy. The sound becomes shriller and more disturbing, a distorted mix of chthonic voices and metallic noises. Suddenly, Adso, in subjective view, sees a monstrous face from which a tear flows, dark as blood. The shot becomes turbulent, and he recoils in fear. The close-up of his face in profile is followed by a shot taken from above, which quickly approaches the back of the boy's head, then moves away upwards, creating the effect of an evil and dangerous presence. A close-up or detail of a monstrous face seems to come to life, thanks to the play of light and shadow, and frightens the young monk. As we look down on Adso from above, we see a human shadow gliding swiftly behind him. The boy continues to contemplate the portal dominated by terrifying faces and figures, while a dark sound of timpani grows louder and the wind increases in intensity. For Adso, it is an immersive experience, in which he appears both

captivated and terrified, as revealed by a close-up of his chiaroscuro face, his mouth half open and his intense facial expressions.

To conclude the sequence, there is a macabre joke that frightens Adso and the viewer: among the sculptures, a head with a diabolical profile, in the shadows and in the foreground, sucks its tongue ferociously, with a muffled laugh. The detail of the boy's dilated pupils accompanies the voice of the stranger, who screams: "*Penitenziagite*!" ('Repent!'). The monstrous monk reveals himself and approaches, paralyzing Adso, who does not know how to react. But the scene immediately becomes comedy, because the monstrous monk Salvatore stages a mocking replica of the diabolical figures on the portal, speaking in "Babelish language" (Eco [1980] 1984: 31) and moving in an ape-like manner. Adso is saved by William, who confronts Salvatore, asking him to explain the heretic Dulcinian term he has just used.

The film condenses the long first part of the novel's description, based on the story of the *Apocalypse of John*, into the first frontal shot with Adso. It then quickly moves on to the most horrific part of the literary description, dominated by a list of infernal beings taken from medieval bestiaries – and closes the sequence with a spoof. At the same time, the film also seeks to rework the isotopies of light and the relationship between the sacred and the profane (or between saints and diabolical monsters) that we explored in the description of the portal in the novel. Salvatore's joke is interesting and successful: it is a performance, a kind of re-enactment, in which he superimposes his own face on that of the monstrous stone figures, becoming a devil among devils. The film thus translates Adso's first impression, as recounted in the novel, when faced with that frightening monk, with very little humanity in his face, who deeply upsets him.

The path of Adso's passion, though much faster, is very similar to the one we analyzed in the novel, a mixture of wonder and terror, but the mystical and cathartic vision of the novel's ending is lost. Through its visual, auditory, and movement modalities, the film creates an unsettling effect for the viewer, using conflicting editing techniques to produce *pathos*. In other words, it produces emotional transformations in both the character and the viewer. This textual mechanism is repeated several times throughout the film, such as at the beginning of the sequence, when Adso witnesses the slaughter of pigs, described in gruesome detail, in stark contrast with the peacefulness of the abbey.

The special effects in Annaud's film (without today's digital effects) must be contextualized in order to understand how effective this use of filmic tricks can be, i.e., the set and lighting, together with those related to sound editing and camera movement.[11] We should consider the visual skills of a mainstream viewer in the mid-1980s who probably saw internationally successful films such as *Alien* (by Ridley

11 For a semiotic analysis of the soundtrack of Annaud's film, see Spaziante 2025.

Scott, 1976), and perhaps Italian films such as the early horror films by Dario Argento, e.g., *Inferno* (*Hell*, 1980). I would also mention, by contrast, John Boorman's film *Excalibur* (released a few years earlier, in 1981), for its stylistic and expressive portrayal of the Middle Ages as gothic and bloody, which soon became a cliché.

As a film that adapts a novel with a touch of historical fiction, Annaud's film seeks verisimilitude in the construction of the set, costumes, and props, as well as in the spaces, lighting, and acting of the actors. The signs and their marked parts of verisimilitude are constructed textually. The set is full of 'heavy' objects, explains Annaud (2004), with architecture reconstructed with precision where it enters the frame, calculating what goes in the background and can be less precise and what goes in the foreground and therefore must be detailed: an object, a building, the parchment. For example, the books on the monks' desks, when we see them next to William, are faithful reproductions on imitation parchment of the miniatures made by monks who restored ancient manuscripts. The clearest are reproductions of the *Apocalypse* of Beatus of Liébana, also mentioned in Eco's novel (Marmo 1990).

Regarding the physical appearance of the monks, Annaud says he was inspired by painters such as Callot and Bruegel to describe the Middle Ages. It is no coincidence, we note, that his sources are representations creating a grotesque and monstrous effect. What interests him, in any case, is a semiotic problem, that is, a question of meaning: if the décor and accessories were not credible, explains Annaud (2004), the viewer would be distracted by imperfections or anachronisms instead of concentrating on the story. However, in his realistic film, Annaud implicitly makes reference to Orson Welles' *Othello* (1951) with torchlight processions piercing the night, and tackles the perspectives from below of the bodies glimpsed at the stake in Carl T. Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928).

Some film critics of the time reviewed the film with skepticism, accusing it of seriously simplifying the ironic intertextuality of the novel and mixing genres to create a gruesome and picturesque Middle Ages (Comuzio 1986). But Annaud is not a naive director; on the contrary, he sought the advice of historian Jacques Le Goff and included some intertextual references (such as illuminated manuscripts). Of course, this is not enough to honor the dense network of intertextual references (implicit or explicit) in the novel, whose writing allows for different levels of interpretation (from the most cultured and refined to the simplest). However, Annaud does not choose a rigid historical genre and deliberately uses a melting pot of genres: detective, philosophical, grotesque (comedy or horror), melodrama (with the love story), and comedy. In fact, he describes his film as a "polar gothique sur le rire" ('gothic thriller about laughter'), in which "humor and drama are mixed, as in the book" (Parra and Zimmer 1986: 58, my translation). And even the love story and erotic scene between Adso and the nameless girl in the film are not just a (free) adaptation of the novel but an implicit intertextual homage to one of his previous films *La Guerre du*

feu (*Quest for Fire, 1981*). So, albeit in a highly simplified form, Annaud's film opens up the discourse to diverse genres, and in its own way weaves implicit or hidden intertextual cross-references. This is how the film attempts to find some levels of equivalence with Eco's novel, even trying to reinterpret the intertextual and post-modern complexity of the novel.

4 The graphic novel *Il nome della rosa* [The Name of the Rose] by Milo Manara

Translating is a process of continuous choices about which elements to keep (albeit transformed) and which to discard, while activating the resonances, virtualities, and potentialities of the source text (Steiner 1996). These are pragmatic choices, linked to the communicative purpose, dictated by the interpreter's interpretation of the source text, in order to create a new text set in a different context and culture. The bond that is created through translation is never one of identity or substitution, but rather a gradual similarity, or a network of equivalent relationships (Dusi 2015). Translation theories refer to "functional equivalence" in relation to the translator's goal and the contextual and socio-cultural constraints that enable (or prevent) its achievement (Bassnett 1980; Eco 2003). Translation is therefore a tension between the need for "adequacy" to the source text and "acceptability" in the target culture. (Toury 1995: 56).

However, a distinction must be made between "semantic" equivalence, i.e., the transfer of content recognized as similar from a first text to a second text, and "pragmatic" equivalence, i.e., the search for effects of meaning for the new user that are similar to those intended by the source text (Eco 2003: 80).[12] Using the medium of the graphic novel, Manara chooses the closest possible equivalence to the source text in his verbal-visual narrative, even with regard to certain quotations. For example, in the graphic novel he reproduces the first miniature described in the novel, which is found in the *Apocalypse* of Beatus of Liébana. Manara (2025) explains that, in order to stay within the 120 pages of the two parts of the graphic novel, he had to reduce Eco's text and choose what to keep, distilling only ten percent of the novel.

The condensation was done with a focus on preserving the narrative structure and certain invariants such as the main characters, with some key dialogues and situations, the space-time of the actions and narrative transformations, and the dominant themes. Then, explains Manara (2025), he decided how many frames to include on each page, choosing the most salient and impactful scenes for the story, to

12 For a critical discussion of Eco's theory of translation, see Nergaard 2017.

tell them with a larger, full-page panel. The other narrative elements, depending on their importance, have pages with two or three frames together. For example, after the introduction and the beginning of the story, we find the first full-page illustration: it is the enormous tower of the library building viewed from below. The way of drawing points of view in space is linked to cinematic framing, with views from above and, above all, unmarked objective views. Compared to Annaud's film, Manara (like Eco 2001: 124) criticizes the cinematic interpretation of a dark and gothic Middle Ages, while in his drawings he has tried to restore the light as described in the novel, without being influenced by the film or TV series.

In terms of style, the graphic novel features at least three different drawing styles to help the reader understand the text: "There is one style that tells the story, one that tells the stories within the story [for example, Eco's fictional preface to the novel], and, to avoid confusion, I decided to adopt another style borrowed from medieval engravings" (Manara 2025: 269, my translation). The artwork is very realistic and polychromatic on most pages, but when representing flashbacks, it uses a more stylized black-and-white style, and sometimes opens up to chromatic modes with primary colors and grotesque phantasmagoria of miniatures and *marginalia* (drawings), made by the copyist monks of medieval illuminated manuscripts.

With regard to the intersemiotic translation of the description of the portal in Eco's novel, the graphic novel picks up its narrative and discursive situation (same characters, spaces, and times) on pages 21–23. It shows Adso alone climbing the steps of the church with a distant view, then stopping in front of the entrance, in a page with three frames. A close-up shot shows him with his eyes wide open and his mouth agape. The temporality of the literary narrative is adhered to, but it unfolds in four stages and three frames. First, we find a broad description of the church in full view as Adso climbs the steps: the church is surrounded by figures that contextualize it (there are farmers and other buildings on one side and mountains in the background), and the frame extends across the upper half of the page. Below this, extending the temporality of reading, the other two actions are contained within two smaller rectangular frames, which mark the action temporally and follow one another. We see Adso closer in full body shot (or long shot), standing in front of the entrance columns in the cold morning light, while the portal is in the shade on the left and seems to 'call' him because Adso's shadow stretches towards the church. Next to it, in a slightly smaller square frame, the previous temporality (a "durative aspect" in Greimasian terms) becomes "punctual" (Greimas e Courtés 1979). Here is what the caption (which runs vertically down the side), taken with cuts from the novel, says: "And suddenly the silent speech of the carved stone plunged me into a vision that even today my tongue can hardly describe" (Manara and Eco 2023: 21; my translation).

The close-up shot of the boy's ecstatic face draws us into a subjective view, in keeping with cinematic convention. The next panel is very expansive: a whole page without frames, but divided into two parts. At the top is a stylized version of the portal, in black and white, enclosed within a semicircular arc above it, and half a page extending the viewing time. At the bottom of the page, without frames, we see a single figure repeated on the left and right: Christ with a sickle in his hand, first held high and then lowered to reap.

Throughout the page, Adso is depicted twice in full body shot, with his back turned: first in the center at the base of the portal, with his arms wide open, in the upper image, then with the same figure still in the center but smaller and in a slightly frightened pose. We note the use of black and white drawings to show the figures that stand out in the portal. Six captions written in different parts of the drawing contain excerpts from the descriptions of the portal in Eco's novel. Compared to the models of Chartres Abbey and Moissac, the figures on the portal of Christ and the animals symbolizing the evangelists (at the top), the saints and elders (just below), and the many damned souls in hell (at the base and on the sides) are greatly simplified. The entire story seems suspended in the blue clouds of a mist that becomes a metaphor for Adso's imagination.

Through the use of space, a verticality of reading is constructed, ranging from sacred characters (at the top and center) to profane and diabolical ones (on the right and at the bottom). Adso's subjective view is reinforced by showing him in full body shot from behind, in two different positions on the same page, with his robe appearing to be swayed by the wind. The boy's position in relation to the figures on the portal is one of maximum proximity: a viewing that becomes cognitive and sensory immersion. Adso's mystical vision is also depicted by the moving figure of Christ the Reaper with his scythe (which translates the mystical vision of the novel), through the figure outlined in gold that splits from left to right, with the gold enhancing the apparition and making it shinier.

If we move from an iconic-figurative reading to a "plastic" reading (Greimas 1984), we see a curved line that closes the portal at the top, which chimes with the curved blade of the sickle at the bottom of the page. The shape of Christ's sickle at the bottom left creates a kind of parenthesis with the curved blade at the bottom right, and seems to enclose the mystical experience of young Adso.

The story ends with a new, smaller frame, in which we see a close-up of Adso closing the subjective vision, while the caption cites a sentence from the novel (with cuts): "Then I realized the vision was speaking precisely of what was happening in the abbey and I knew we had made our way up there in order to witness a great and celestial massacre" (Manara and Eco 2023: 22; my translation). Adso's agnition, unlike in the novel and film, ends with a call from William, before the encounter with the deformed monk Salvatore.

Barbieri defines Manara's graphic novel as an intersemiotic translation that necessarily works by "reduction", managing to draw us quite effectively into the atmosphere "between the demonic, the mystical, and the rational that characterizes Eco's story, even transforming the theoretical erudition that shines through in the original into visual erudition, with pages and pages of references to the figurative imagery of the Middle Ages" (Barbieri 2025: 219; my translation).

5 The TV miniseries *Il nome della rosa*

Films and graphic novels are very different media products, even as multimodal and multisensory experiences. Semiotically closer to film is the TV series, which, however, presents a noticeable narrative ellipsis compared to the sequence of the portal, driven by production reasons. The transpositions considered thus far are based on "intertextual isotopies" (Dusi 2014, 2019), which keep the characters, figures from the world, and dominant themes of Eco's novel recognizable, at least partially. Each new text thus proposes meanings that are either continuous or discontinuous with the fictional world of the original text.

Grignaffini (2025) explains that the eight-episode miniseries *The Name of the Rose*, directed by Giacomo Battiato, has characteristics that are more suited to pay TV or streaming platforms than to mainstream television, such as "accurate historical reconstruction, cinematic directing style, the presence of international stars, nonlinear narration, and original and complex themes" (Grignaffini 2025: 161; my translation). Bernardelli (2025) focuses on the multistrand mechanism, noting that "it is a narrative mode in which a story is told from the perspective of different characters, more or less equivalent in terms of their narrative relevance […], and each of these characters has their own narrative thread" (Bernardelli 2025: 171; my translation). The miniseries enacts a series of strategic changes to the narrative structure of the novel, retaining some storylines (such as the mystery), removes others (deletes some characters), and adding new ones, working on the characters' backstories through flashbacks.

We thus enter the past (not narrated in the novel) of the inquisitor Bernard Gui and the monk cellarer Remigio da Varagine, or the girl loved by Adso. And in the flashbacks about the heretic Fra Dolcino, a new story unfolds, that of his daughter Anna. According to Bernardelli, these narrative strategies aim to appeal to different audiences, in terms of communication: the narrative shifts from the 'rational' pole, embodied by the character of William of Baskerville, to the 'emotional' pole, embodied by Anna, as well as by the peasant girl in her relationship with Adso. The character of Anna was invented specifically for the TV series. She is a free-spirited warrior who wants to avenge her father Dolcino and her mother Margherita, who

were burned at the stake as heretics, and wants to find her father's letters hidden in the abbey. A 'proto-feminist' thus breaks into the fictional world drawn from Eco's novel, but it is also a way of bringing out a narrative line linked to heresy. Screenwriter and director Battiato explains that the TV series aims to be equivalent to many of the novel's essential themes, also reopening thematic isotopies such as "religious fundamentalism, Franciscan poverty, relations between State and Church, and the subversive power of laughter" (Battiato 2020: 112–113; my translation). From the screenplay onwards, great attention is paid to respecting William's dialogues (mostly taken directly from the novel) and to highlighting Adso's point of view.

The writing of the miniseries combines the logic of seriality with that of contemporary transmediality. The TV series also opens up to what Mittell (2015: 314–316) defines as the "centripetal" and "centrifugal" logics of transmedial storytelling and television seriality. The new stories (backstories) that reinvent and explore the past of certain characters through numerous flashbacks are a centripetal way of working within the "canon" established by the original storyworld, hypothesizing what motivates the characters based on the clues left in the novel. The invention of the character of Anna, Dolcino's daughter seeking revenge, is instead part of the centrifugal logic of narrative expansion, which rewrites the narrative world with parallel and alternative stories, "what if" scenarios similar to fan reappropriation practices and the logic of paraquels.

With television series, intersemiotic translation becomes transmedia, partly because we are faced with the result of a double translation link and a comparison with both the source text (Eco's novel) and a text from the translation pipeline, such as Annaud's film. Another transmedia approach is also evident: using seriality to expand narrative worlds.[13]

6 Conclusions

Il meme della rosa [The Rose Meme] is an edited book published in Italy by La Nave di Teseo in 2025 (Dusi and Eugeni 2025a) that contains many analyses and theoretical reflections, introduced by a long preface by Jurji Lotman to the first publication of Eco's novel in Russia (in 1990), never previously translated into Italian. It also includes an appendix with three interviews: with the director of the TV miniseries, Giacomo Battiato, the graphic novel artist Milo Manara, and Francesco Filidei, a composer who adapted Eco's novel into an opera in 2025. In this article, I have cited

13 According to Jenkins, "an adaptation takes the same story from one medium and retells it in another. An extension seeks to add something to the existing story as it moves from one medium to another" (Jenkins 2011: 1–3).

from *Il meme della rosa* some analyses with semiotic and media studies perspectives, focusing on the intertextuality of the novel, some paratexts such as Eco's drawings, the transposition of the novel into Annaud's film, Manara's graphic novel, and the TV miniseries *The Name of the Rose*.

Transposing an aesthetic work such as a novel into another work using radically different expressive materials, according to Eco (2001, 2003), as in Chatman (1978), can only produce an "adaptation", in which the textual intentions are radically transformed, because one is forced to make explicit (or render evident) what is implicit. Following Eco, in fact, in adaptation "the interpretation is mediated by the adapter, and is not left at the mercy of the addressee" (Eco 2001: 125). These processes should be understood as forms of interpretation and negotiation, not as true translations, which for Eco are only interlinguistic.

Nevertheless, the theoretical perspective I have outlined in this article is based on the assumption of a general translatability between languages and between systems of signification (Greimas and Courtés 1979; Lotman 1984, 1990) which constructs cultural semiosis together with, and not in an ancillary and subordinate way to, the incessant process of interpretation (Eco 1990; Peirce 1931–1958). Translating and reinterpreting a novel into a film, graphic novel, or TV series means dealing with all levels of the source text, which can then be reproduced in the target text. For this reason, I agree with Calabrese (2000: 113–15), who proposes an intersemiotic translatability that activates a possible expressive, inter-substantial equivalence with the source text in the target text.

In a comparative analysis, therefore, the chosen level of pertinence should be specified (Dusi 2015). In our case, I focused the analysis on the translatability of a sequence from the novel, starting with a close reading and then moving on to the textual transformations, which differed from one media product to another. I have compared some semantic-narrative structures and considered how the skills and emotions of the characters and the viewer are constructed by the target text. I focused on how a transposition opens up a network of possible equivalences with the original novel, proposing to search for dominant isotopies (Greimas and Courtés 1979).

To demonstrate how a mechanism like literary ekphrasis can be translated intersemiotically, I examined a famous example from Umberto Eco's 1980 novel, *The Name of the Rose*. Visual, auditory, and kinesthetic effects mimic cinematic effects. The effectiveness of literary ekphrasis arises from elements linked to vision, light, and spatiality, as well as the emotional transformations experienced by the protagonist, Adso. These transformations are also felt by the model reader, who synthesizes a vision of moving images that becomes auditory.

The abundance of references in a literary text can be translated into visual media like graphic novels, as well as into audiovisual media such as films and TV

series. In the cathedral portal sequence, Annaud's film reinterprets many of the novel's visual and auditory isotopies multimodally, evoking pathos in both Adso's emotional journey and the viewer. Although the TV series presents significant narrative ellipsis regarding the cathedral portal description, its storytelling opens up transmedia possibilities, reintroducing implicit elements from the novel.

In contrast, Manara's graphic novel reflects the novel's ekphrasis, translating the isotopies of light, space, and movement between the visual and auditory while recreating the mystical experience of young Adso in its own way.

According to Eco (2003), an adaptation is always an interpretative relationship that opens up the source text in a dialogical and intertextual dimension, as Stam (2005) also argues. The transpositions I have presented reopen the dialogic dimension but also attempt, at least in some parts of the text, to translate the poetic and implicit modes of the novel, even opening up to intertextual quotations and allusions. The semantic richness and indeterminacy of literature are not depleted or 'betrayed' by an intersemiotic transposition, but rather challenged and relaunched and, in the best cases, re-semanticized (Lotman 1984).

Different media products, as well as different multimodal experiences, can be interpreted as linked by recognizable intertextual isotopies. Each derivative text presents them with textually intended effects (even if each reader or viewer can then interpret or use the new story as they prefer). These effects are in continuity or discontinuity with the possible fictional world of origin, which in our case is the storyworld constructed by Eco's first novel.

Torop (1995, 2013) claims that from the semiotic perspective of "total translation," what we are dealing with is a matter of "interpretation of culture as an infinite translation process, while any particular text in a culture can exist simultaneously in the form of multiple transformations, each of which can be considered translation in the semiotic sense" (Torop 2013: 3). A media-focused narratological perspective, instead, defines "transfictional storytelling" as when "a given storyworld is represented through many different documents" (Ryan 2014: 34).

If, in semiotic terms, Eco considers it a "negotiation" (Eco 2003), in my suggested approach it is a dialogue between textual strategies of enunciation, and affective and emotional strategies, to construct effects of meaning comparable to those of the source texts. From the broader perspective of cultural semiotics, the transition becomes a translation problem of invariants and variations. According to Saldre and Torop, in fact: "narrative texts that exist simultaneously in several media appear in cultural experience as both a topological invariant or a storyworld and as typological, medium-specific variations (Saldre and Torop 2012: 41)".

I would suggest that the narrative "possible world" or the most dynamic storyworld in the transition between novels and other media products should be thought

of in a flexible and textual way. It can become a sharing or variation of a network of "rules of the game" (Goodman 1978), given, for example, by the dominant isotopies. A set of invariants that are recognizable even in their media transformation, producing a reassuring effect first and foremost on producers and then on the audience. But one that can open up new media texts to unexplored and innovative territories.

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