

## Transposition of the Scientific Elements in Hiroshi Teshigahara's Adaptation of Kobo Abe's *the Face of Another*

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Hiroshi Teshigahara's film adaptation of the famous Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another* with special attention on the transposition of the scientific elements of the novel in the film. This article observes how Teshigahara, through cinematic techniques, transposes Abe's scientific language into visual forms. Abe himself involved in the film adaptation by writing the screenplay, in which he prioritized the literary aspects over the filmic aspect. This makes the adaptation become more interesting because Teshigahara is known as a stylish filmmaker. Another noteworthy aspect is the internal dialogues domination within the novel narration. It is written in an epistolary-like narration, placing the protagonist as a single narrator which consequently raises subjectivity. The way Teshigahara externalizes the stream-of-consciousness narration-like into the medium of film is another significant topic of this essay.

Keywords: Transposition, scientific element, adaptation, The Face of Another.

### INTRODUCTION

This research aims to investigate the way Hiroshi Teshigahara transposes the novel of Kobo Abe, *The Face of Another*, into a film with special attention on the transposition of the scientific elements of the novel. Being prominent figures in their respective fields, both Teshigahara and Abe has to negotiate to make sure the film adaptation of the novel is acceptable and maintains the signature of both the filmmaker and the novelist. The scope of this research is limited to film adaptation, which is the transfer of a written work to film. There are three ways in which a filmmaker can adapt a literary work, one of which is transposition. Transposition, according to Wagner as quoted in Vugt (2011), is a process, "...in which the screen version sticks closely to the literary sources, with a minimum interference (p. 2). In general, Alqadi (2015) argues that the role of adaptation is make "...critics eager to continually discuss the degree to which a film is faithful to the literary work" (p. 42). To reveal the transposition process of the novel, the structure of the research focuses on the intrinsic analysis of the film through its cinematography and mise-en-scene while it is juxtaposed and compared with the novel. The findings are hoped to enrich film studies analysis in general and film adaptation in particular, especially the transposition process.

*The Face of Another* is a famous novel by Kobo Abe, written in 1964, which deals with the theme of

alienation and isolation. It tells a story about a man named Okuyama, a scientist, whose face is deformed due to a freak laboratory incident. He experiences stress and trauma and decides to consult a doctor named K and discuss the possibility of creating a mask, or a face for him. The mask that provides him a face of another psychologically results in him having an alter ego. With his alter ego, he tries to regain his intimacy with his wife and at the same time testing his wife's loyalty as he approaches his own wife as someone else. When his wife falls for "another man," he angrily confronts his wife and reveals his disguise. To his surprise, his wife has known all along that the man is her husband. Feeling insulted by her husband's way of testing her fidelity, she leaves him and in the end the narrator immerses himself into the personality of his mask. The novel is written in an epistolary-like narration which puts the narrator as the single source for all information that the readers receive. Consequently, the readers are left with the subjective voice of the narrator.

The film adaptation of the novel is directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara, who is not only known as a filmmaker, but also as a designer, flower artist, and calligrapher (Grilli, 2007, par. 1). His adaptation of Abe's *The Face of Another* was not his first collaboration with Abe, they have been working together in three other adaptation projects, which include *Pitfall* (1962), *Woman in the Dunes* (1964), and *The Man without a Map* (1968). They, according to De Vaulx (2012),

“...generally tend to be categorised as part of the Japanese New Wave, but are also idiosyncratic enough to stand out from that group” (para. 1).

Kōbō Abe’s *The Face of Another* and its film adaptation by Hiroshi Teshigahara have been investigated from many viewpoints, particularly from psychological and philosophical ones. However, the fact that the novel is “psychological *science fiction*” is somehow considered insignificant. Science fiction, according to Lombardo (2015) is defined as, “... a literary and narrative approach to the future, involving plots, action sequences, specific settings, dramatic solutions, and varied and unique characters, human and otherwise. Generally inspired and informed by modern science and contemporary thought, it is imaginative and often highly detailed scenario-building and thought experiments about the future, set in the form of stories” (p. 7).

Abe is first and foremost a science fiction writer, besides also known as a “playwright, director, and theater innovator” (Grilli, 2007, para. 1). His status as a science fiction writer was highly recognized by a famous Japanese publishing company with his book publication in 1971 (Matthew, 1989, p. 182). Bolton (2009) argues that Abe’s works “...incorporates material from disciplines such as biochemistry, geology, mathematics, and computer programming, to name just a few, and science becomes a source for his language...” (p. 29). This corresponds to Matthew’s (1989) categorization of psychological science fiction in Japanese literature as one variety of “Soft Science Fiction,” the work of which is based on “... such organized approaches to knowledge as sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, historiography, theology, linguistics, and some approaches to myth” (p. 3). In the context of psychology, Cahill (2009) argues that Abe often creates, “...frustrated protagonists who search for identity and freedom in a never-ending struggle between the ideas of ‘the individual’ and ‘the collective’” (p. 2).

This essay focuses on the scientific elements of the film adaptation, in particular observing how Teshigahara, through cinematic techniques, transposes Abe’s scientific language into visual forms. Transposition itself is defined as, “...an attempt to produce the original as the author might have done if he or she appeared in the given socio-historical time and place of the transposition and retained the consciousness that created each sentence of the original.” (Whittlesey, 2012, para. 6). It is fortunate for Teshigahara as he is contemporaneous with Abe, the author himself, although this condition offers another

challenge when two powerful authorities, the director and the author, have to work on the same page to adapt the novel. Unlike translation, transposition can occur from one media to another, for example from literature to film. According to McGibbon (2014), the success of adaptation depends on, “...how its adaptor has altered and transformed its source material in order to work effectively in its new medium...on how thoroughly the adaptation embraces the fundamentals of its new medium, while staying true to the heart of the story” (p. 8). Narrative is definitely the keywords both in a novel and a film, and the problem lies in the different sign systems that both novel and film operate on. The procedure of creating a good adaptation is to find a common ground for the novel and film in delivering similar message through different semiotic system. One of the ways in dealing with this gap is when Abe is appointed to write the screenplay for his adapted novel in which he prioritizes the literary aspects over the filmic aspect (Desser, 1988, p. 77). I argue that this step is necessary considering that Teshigahara is known as a stylish filmmaker with a “...natural tendency towards aesthetic over-expression” (De Vault, 2012, par. 12). Another noteworthy aspect is the internal dialogues domination within the novel narration. It is written in an epistolary-like narration, placing the protagonist as a single narrator which consequently raises subjectivity. The way Teshigahara externalizes the stream-of-consciousness narration-like into the medium of film is another significant topic of this essay.

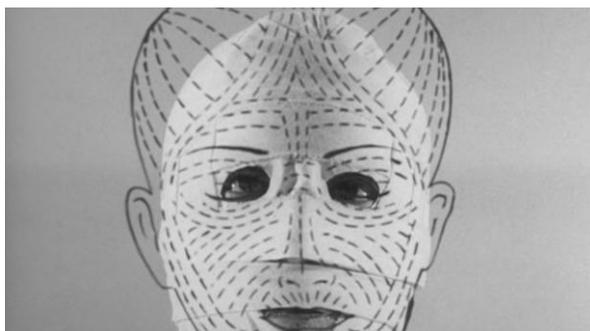
When talking about science in literature, the question of the distinctions between them will arise. Among those distinctions is the instinctive general notion that science deals with truth and literature with fantasy or fiction. Bolton (2009) further argues that through his novel Abe forces the reader to question the distinctions further by blurring the boundary between science and literature (p. 5). Abe broadens and problematizes the idea of literary language when he incorporates scientific terms in his work. In a way, Abe’s statement offers a broader freedom to interpret his work. However, this essay does not attempt to clarify the distinction nor take a certain standpoint on it but rather to point out Abe’s standpoint that might affect the film adaptation. *The Face of Another* exemplifies the science-literature intertwining. His work bridges science and literature, juxtaposing them to expose the unexpected powers and limitations of both—limitations that all too often become invisible to those within a given discourse, and powers that often go unnoticed by those outside it (Bolton, 2009, p. 17). The citation clearly states Abe’s position and viewpoint in dealing with science and literature; he

stands between them and sees things from both viewpoints. Another interesting aspect is figuring out Teshigahara's way in dealing with them in the adaptation. The fact that film medium is a scientific product might suggest science superiority over the literary aspects, which add more complication on the issue.

## ANALYSIS

*The Face of Another* is organized around science: The protagonist is a scientist. He loses face due to a scientific accident, then attempts to regain/release his "old" identity through science; his scientific arguments are apparent throughout his anguish. Teshigahara's adaptation is considered one of his best films. From adaptation theory, the film is seen as a formal entity of product, an extensive transposition of a particular work which suggests that through certain cinematic techniques the film claims its own entity, different yet closely related to the original source (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7). Basically, "...any adaptation is different from the original text and is autonomous while there are some similarities and echoes from the original one" (Anushiravani & Alinezhadi, 2016, p. 74). Thus, it is interesting to compare and contrast the adaptation and the original source through the cinematic techniques that Teshigahara uses and to see how far Abe influences the adaptation.

One important aspect of science in the novel is the technology that creates the mask. In their essay, Botting and Wilson (2002) argue that technology has been providing humans with the inhuman element which lies at the extreme core of identity: The engine of desire (p. 79). The mask, representing a human face while at the same time concealing it, is inhuman due to its nature of merely attaching to human body without becoming part of it. It is alien and false. Teshigahara interprets this idea of alienation and concealment through one particular scene (see figure 1) when the scientist stands in front of a transparent glass panel with some drawing on it, cleverly suggesting the interplay of alienation/concealment.



**Figure 1.** The man behind a transparent glass panel in the laboratory.

*The Face of Another* in a way reflects their argument through the mask that becomes a means of desire fulfillment of the protagonist. The protagonist's disbelief in the importance of a face to a man's existence gradually diminishes especially after he meets Dr K. who argues that "Man's soul is in his skin" (Abe, 1966, p. 26). Thus the man determines to create a mask with a hope that it can give him back "an identity"; not his own but a new one, as he believes that making a mask of his own face means negating the meaning of the mask itself. The trace of technology in the detailed construction of the mask is apparent throughout the novel, and it is interesting to see how Teshigahara makes the technological narration visual.

The text of the novel is divided into three major parts in the form of three notebooks, bracketed by a prefatory letter and postscript. The first notebook, the black book, is characterized mostly by the technical language. This is the part where the construction of the mask is described, covering a period of nine months. In detail, Abe narrates the stages of the mask's construction, although the readers might not pay much attention to it because it is probably too technical. The scientific part of the narration is significant because it represents the early part of the protagonist's technology-driven transformation. The white notebook completes the mask and brings the account up to the day before the seduction, three months in all. The grey notebook is the shortest in duration, only three days. It provides details on the night of the seduction and the twenty-four hours on either side. Teshigahara's adaptation consists of nineteen chapters that are chronologically structured. Differing from the novel, Teshigahara does not use any notebooks as the point of narration. Instead, he uses two characters who narrate alternately with the man without a face. The technical/scientific scenes are spread throughout the chapters, with at least seven chapters covering the laboratory as the prominent scientific setting.

The black notebook is the man's life stage when he believes that creating and wearing a mask will give him back his identity and eventually his pathway to relations to others. To some extent, Teshigahara tries to maintain Abe's application of the scientific elements. The film is marked by their continuous presence: The laboratory and the mask. However, there are some significance changes in characterization: The role of the protagonist as a scientist/a polymer chemist is replaced by adding another character, a plastic surgeon/psychiatrist who creates the mask, the man's direct confrontation with the wife, and the surrealistic description of the laboratory. The appearance of two new narrators in the film suggests more objectivity.

The film opens with a scientific visualization of fake human body parts inside a clinic with the doctor's narration on humans' inferiority complex following the loss of body parts (see figure 2).



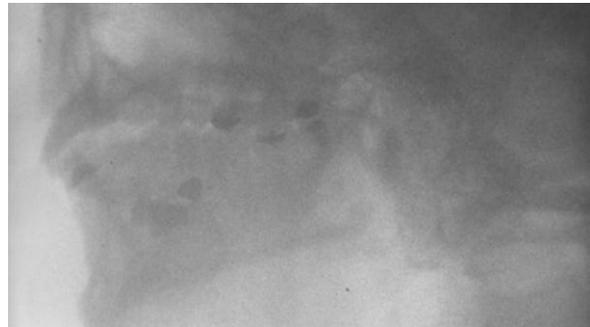
**Figure 2.** Artificial body parts

These scenes indicate the strong significance of science in the film, that the film foregrounds its narration on the scientific aspect and its consequences. The man without a face ironically depends on science to provide an answer to the question of identity; the same science that damaged his face and took away his identity. The black notebook chapter shows the ambiguous interaction between the narrator and technology by alternating scientific passages with less rational, more confused passages. Teshigahara visualizes this ambiguous interaction through the division of film chapters. Alternate scenes in the laboratory and the scenes before the mask is constructed show the ambiguity. The man's determination to solve the problem through science is apparent in the laboratory scenes, while his less rational, confused dialogues that show his doubt is obvious in the scenes outside the laboratory, particularly at his home when he often time conducts sarcastic, irrational dialogues with his wife. He also feels uncomfortable and doubtful when he wears the mask for the first time (in the maiden voyage chapter of the film).

The opening scene is followed by the man's narration through an x-ray. Teshigahara's choice to visualize the narrator behind an x-ray also suggests the important role of science. The audience is watching a live x-ray movie as he talks to the examining doctor off screen (see figure 3).

This initial image seems reflect the novel's and the readers' desire to get inside the protagonist's head. These initial shots are different from the novel which begins with the story of the man's leaving the city for the hideaway, then continues with the events which happened at his office until, at one point, he decides to construct a mask. The narrator's meticulous technical description of the mask's construction in the novel is

visualized by the sophisticated yet intimidating laboratory and the activities within it. Both the novel narration and the film visualization of the mask construction reflect the narrator's hope to reduce the problem of his identity crisis to technical terms so he can solve it with technical means.



**Figure 3.** An x-ray scene of the man

The novel does not provide any detailed description of the place where the mask is constructed, but the laboratory in the film is very significant, as if replacing the scientific narration that is tricky to externalize visually. The laboratory is described as barren, with blank white walls that creates a sense of borderless, as if one were standing in a limitless space (see figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The disorienting laboratory and its activities

McDonald (2000) argues that the blank white walls speak of an empty, impersonal world (p. 278). If her interpretation is extended, the laboratory suggests what a scientific laboratory is usually like: White color that suggests neutrality, cleanliness, sterility; and impersonality that suggests non-emotional involvement in scientific conducts. The way the props in the laboratory are arranged suggests a maze-like space, where transparent racks filled with transparent models of body parts, transparent blinds with drawings of human bodies and faces encapsulate the laboratory. The surrealistic place brings the aura of sophisticated scientific space and, at the same time, creates distance and disorientation to the man without a face and the audience.

Further, Mellen (1975) states that the novel is replete with surrealist images that intrigue Teshigahara independently of their service to the imagery or theme of the film. She further states that the film is finally more grotesque than emotionally compelling (p. 167). The scene in the plastic surgeon's office are appropriate in the interpretation of the novel scientific narration; they are "...a perfect equivalent for the bizarre and unnerving quality of the surgeon's task, providing people not merely with new faces, but with new identities as well" (Mellen, 1975, p. 167). The barren laboratory somehow reflects the man's barren life, especially his sexual life. He is deprived of love, affection and identity. The use of transparent props might suggest the nature of science that always questions and attempts to reveal everything until they are logically clear. To the man without a face, transparency might reflect his condition after the incident. He becomes distinct and obvious to others, yet without identity. Teshigahara skillfully creates a surrealistic yet suitable visualization to interpret the scientific narration of the novel.

The next chapter takes place several weeks after the preceding one, and takes us through the final steps of the mask construction and the first few times the man tries it on. The white notebook contains few technical passages; the language of the second chapter is more imaginative, referring to the dialogue inside the man's mind. However, this does not mean science's role is not important, in fact, science seems to start taking over the man. The imaginative language of the second chapter is gradually associated with the voice of the man wearing the mask as it tries to take over the man without a face. The mask *is* the product of science. Thus, it can be said that science, through the mask, begins taking over the man. Teshigahara shows this gradual taking over in the last eight chapters of the film. The inner conflict of the man is clearly externalized through distinctive shots of the man without a face and the man in the mask. (see figure 5 and 6).



**Figure 5.** The first appearance of the man

The first appearance of the man on the film as seen in figure 5 is from his back, and the audience can see that his head is fully bandaged. At this point, the man is still anxious about whether he has to wear a mask or not. The anxiety that he experiences is interpreted through the shot of the man from the back. Gradually, however, he becomes determined to have a mask and even plans to lead a double life with a single purpose to trigger jealousy of his wife and others in general.



**Figure 6.** The first appearance of the man with his 'mask'

In contrast to the man's first appearance that is shot from the back, Teshigahara chooses to take a frontal close-up shot of the man shortly after the doctor gives him a face. The scene occurs in the laboratory, and the audience can see that the frontal shot angle is taken slightly from below the character's face that creates a sense of confidence from the man. Thus, the contrasting front vs back shot of the same character foreshadows the domination of the mask (the science) in the man's life. The domination is later proven through the fact that there are more shots of the man in the mask in the last chapters compared to the earlier chapters of the film. It strongly hints at the science domination and the man's helpless submission to the new face he has.

I argue that Teshigahara's choice to introduce the two different states of the man in contrasting shots is to generate the idea of the uncanny, which Freud defines as something that is frightening because it is both not known and familiar. Both the man wearing the bandage and the mask is uncanny, suggesting something that is familiar (a human being), yet unfamiliar at the same time (the bandaged head and the masked man). Abe's idea to explore a complex issue between science and identity along with his tendency to, "...stretch the boundaries of logic by introducing absurd scenarios that increasingly turn hysterically nonsensical" (Posadas, 2004, p. 3) are fittingly transposed by Teshigahara through uncanny visualization of the man.

One important scientific aspect that belongs particularly to the film is the doctor. The film splits the narrator of the novel into two separate characters, the doctor and the man himself. Sakaki (2005) argues that one's identity cannot be established on one's own; it has to be negotiated with others (p. 378). By Sakaki's argument, the doctor thus acts as that "other" who watches the man. The doctor's function can be explained through Freud's psychoanalytic theory. The doctor might be associated with both the man's super ego and the id that controls his ego while at the same time it releases the man's hidden desire. The doctor at one time can act as the man's consciousness, particularly when he advises him to realize the consequences of his decision; but at another time the doctor acts as the man's unconsciousness when he advises the man to satisfy his own curiosity about the effect of the mask. With this additional character Teshigahara complicates the scientific narration and at the same time simplifies the externalization of the inner monologues. The internal monologues become face-to-face dialogues between the man and the doctor. When the man kills the doctor, he kills not only his "super ego" and "id", but also his ego (identity).

The grey notebook marks the climax of the mask's violent imagination. The chapter opens with the narrator putting on the mask at his secret apartment and then traveling to his own neighborhood to wander the street outside his house and fantasize about assaulting his wife. The grey notebook is filled with the language of science is generally associated with the language of reason. Thus, science is apparently prominent through the reasoning narration which is mostly shown in the supplementary notes when he spends more time second-guessing and amplifying his own words. Teshigahara visualizes the language of reason through the scenes in the *Waltz*, *Alibi* and *Seduction* chapters, when the man in the mask already feels comfortable with himself and starts thinking about the seduction. At this point, the man in the mask seems already dominate the man without a face, or in other words science is taking over and controlling humanity (especially the desire).

The wife's letter in the novel is parallel with the *Masquerade* chapter in the film. This is the point at which the scientific optimism seems to crumble after the man realizes that the mask fails to perform the disguise he expects it to. Teshigahara transforms the wife's letter into a face-to-face confrontation that results in a highly dramatic turning point of the man's life. The dangling mask during the man's dialogues with his wife in his apartment suggests the beginning of a detachment between the man and the mask (see figure 7).

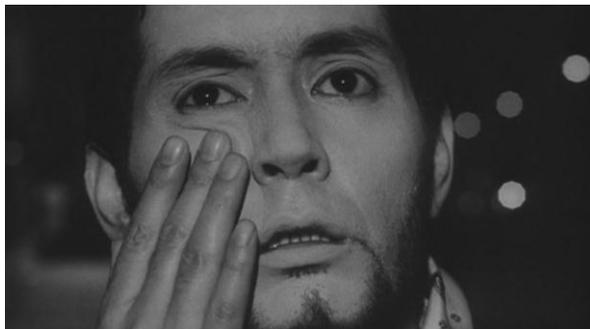


**Figure 7.** The man's mask is dangling on his face

The fact that the mask is still dangling and not fully detached from the man's face suggests the strong influence of the mask on the man. The scene is not only a dialogue, but it is *trialogue* between the man without a face, the man in the mask, and his wife. The juxtaposition between science and literature is obvious in the scene. This is also the climax of the film, the turning point of the man's life. The man starts to realize the failure of the mask (science) and it really makes him furious.

Both the novel and the film have open endings. The novel ends with his comments on his wife's letter and his wondering what he will do next. After a few pages he breaks off his narrative, and the novel ends. The film ends differently; Teshigahara adds the *Freedom* chapter that does not exist in the novel. This last chapter can be seen as the man's vengeance towards science, where science is represented by the plastic surgeon. The plastic surgeon has taken away the man's past by creating the mask and promising a future with the new identity. But when his wife recognizes him it brings down his belief in the future with the mask. By murdering the plastic surgeon, he takes revenge on science. Science that has erased his past now takes away his future. The title of the last chapter "Freedom" is not a freedom that he expects, but a freedom from identity as he is still struggling to find one for his new self. From a scientific point of view, the man in the mask may suffer from identity dissonance that is defined as, "...the disconcerting internal experience of conflict between irreconcilable aspects of self" (Joseph, et.al., 2017, p. 100) which includes emotional disruption that may lead to violence. In the end, Teshigahara, like Abe, leaves the interpretation on what will become of the man to the audience. Teshigahara ends the film by a close up shot of the man in the mask, whose look is empty, while touching the skin of his face in uncertainty (see figure 8) whether his new face will give him freedom, or ironically, another state of imprisonment. The visualization is undeniably also rooted in the fact that Abe is influenced by the Western existential theme, in which the characters "... struggle to assert their subjective self and exercise their will and freedom,

while experiencing deep anxiety, absurdity and nothingness in life” (Jafari & Pourjafari, 2013, pp. 1-2). The close-up shot of the man in the mask below clearly shows anxiety and uncertainty, fittingly reflects Abe's idea of identity which is, “... changing and unstable, and the feeling of not belonging to a place is something individuals should actively seek” (Habjan, 2016, p. 73).



**Figure 8.** The man in the mask looks into his bleak future

## CONCLUSION

Abe's *The Face of Another* obviously shows abundant scientific elements, and he skillfully blends them with literature. The three notebooks representing three chapters are structured in a way that they reflect the interplay between science and literature. The novel is dominated with internal monologues of the narrator that create a challenge to the film adaptation. Teshigahara relies heavily on a rich array of film techniques to transpose the essentially scientific narration of the novel. The film medium as a scientific product also offers more tools for Teshigahara to interpret the scientific narration through scientifically based cinematic techniques. The mise-en-scene is particularly helpful in the transposition of the scientific elements of the novel, most obviously through the props and setting, particularly the laboratory and the mask. One might say that they are the essence of Teshigahara's adaptation in externalizing the scientific narration. In this context, the mask is the victory of technology and the loss of humanity. His using multiple narrators also helps bringing a more objective narration as well as highly dramatic tensions to the film. The most obvious difference between the original source and the adaptation is the added last scene that strengthens the impact of science upon the narrator. Despite the stylistic differences between Abe's and Teshigahara's narrations, the adaptation succeeds in strengthening both the question of identity, and the theme of alienation and isolation, through the exploration of science that the novel provokes. In another word, both Teshigahara and Abe's contribution to the adaptation is not limited to their role as a director and a screenplay writer, but

they both influence one another in the process, making the adaptation as intriguing, if not more, as the novel. For instance, the closing shot of a faceless crowd near the end of the film (see figure 9) captivates a resonance to the final narrative of Abe's novel: “What is amply clear, at least, is that I shall be lonely and isolated, that I shall only become a lecher... Of course, I do know that the responsibility is not the mask's alone, and that problem lies rather within me. Yet it is not only in me, but in everybody; I am not alone in this problem” (Abe, 1966, p. 238).



**Figure 9.** The man (on the left) and the doctor (on the right) among the 'faceless' crowd

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