

THE IMPORTANCE OF FILM ADAPTATIONS FOR OPTIMIZING LITERARY TEXT INTERPRETATION

Alexandra SUDNIȚÎNA

Catedra de Filologie Engleză

În prezentul articol sunt analizate trăsăturile lingvistice ale adaptărilor cinematografice, bazate pe romanele contemporane engleze. Sunt discutate particularitățile genului literar și cinematografic care determină specificul percepției operei literare adaptate. De asemenea se identifică legătura sursei literare inițiale cu versiunea cinematografică a acesteia, care contribuie la procesul unei analize mai productive și mai eficiente a operei literare. Se discută elementele analizei critice literare ale romanului, precum și trăsăturile lui stilistice, structurale și emoționale, care sunt accentuate și concretizate în procesul prelucrării cinematografice a operei literare. Aceasta ajută la optimizarea analizei textuale și comparative a ambelor opere de artă.

The problematic of transferring canonic fiction pieces into other media, such as the audio-visual cinematic or dramatic ones, has long become a polemical issue in the sphere of criticism and literary theory, since the changes the initial source undergoes in the process determine the ambiguous status of the resulting adaptation. On the one hand, a new form of expression based on the classic work of art comes into being, yet the latter is subjected to significant transformations which may appear too radical or unacceptable altogether to the adepts of the primary matter.

Much importance is attributed to the possibility of imparting scientific status to film as a phenomenon, which appears relatively new, especially when compared to literature as one of the contemporary classic liberal arts. The initial step in relating film and literary adaptation studies to the area of inquiry is to define the science which studies both the genres on relatively equal terms. The simplest solution to the problem would be defining film as the audio-visual genre within the boundaries of cinematic theory, focusing on the technical and structural aspects of film-making as a process, as well as with reference to film criticism related to evaluating a movie, or an adaptation for that matter, in terms of the general audio-visual aesthetic value and commercial success. Literary works, such as novels, can be approached, as is generally believed, in mere terms of literary theory and analysis, wherein their verbal essence and aesthetic merit, as well as critical evaluation, are perceived and studied. However, novels and their film versions are inseparable owing to their interdependence, since the former serves a basis or a starting point for the latter, and analyzing the two would be hard without finding a unified system of rules and regulations providing for their comparison and evaluation considering similarities and divergences of the genres. A specific sub-branch of literary study is required to solve the issue in question.

This field of literary analysis has long been termed narratology, or narrative theory, and the major question is the precise location of the science in the hierarchy of academic literary research. M. Fludernik offers a number of perspectives from which narrative theory can and in fact should be regarded as the link between film and literature: “Narratology has traditionally been a sub-discipline of the study of literature and also has particularly close ties to poetics, the theory of genre and to the semiotics, or semiology, of literature... Like genre theory, narrative theory deals with the distinctions between lyric, drama and epic... Narratology shares many characteristics with poetics because it analyses the characteristics of (narrative) literary texts and their aesthetic (narrative) functions. And finally, narratology resembles semiotics in so far as it analyses the constitution of (narrative) meaning in texts (films, conversational narratives etc.)” [Fludernik, 20]. This particularizing function of analyzing the narrative properties peculiar to a multitude of genres gives proof to the multifarious spheres narrative theory gains access to stemming from the bonds with literary theory, poetics and semiotics. The alleged scientific uniqueness of narrative theory permits it to uncover the properties of film as a narrative and place it, conventional as it can be, on the same scale with works of literature.

A sufficient amount of argument is inevitably brought about to justify high aestheticism of a book as opposed to its film version; yet the film theory studies have continuously shown that, beside being a product of highly popular culture, film adaptation as a specific subgenre of cinematic art can easily be associated to it. One of the current assumptions revealed by Th. Elsaesser is that “as an industrial technological product,

film is a commodity produced to make money and created on the basis of a complex and sophisticated division of labor and tasks, with a high degree of specialization in each branches of its production” [Elsaesser, 14]. In this case film as a cultural product is inadvertently limited and acquires the status of a cultural commodity, turning into a mere material necessity, and often reduced to a product in its own right, subject to buying and selling, regardless of its specificity or sophistication.

In any case, associations with literature as high classical art are possible to be made: “Its textual basis is the shooting script, itself a historically evolved practice, at one end comparable to a blueprint for an engineering project on the basis of which tasks are allocated, schedules distributed and budgets worked out; and on the other hand, comparable to a poem, in which strictly conventionalized forms, such as length, rhyme-scheme, and meter, nonetheless allow for the most extraordinary versatility and ingenuity” [Elsaesser, 14]. In accordance with the given assumption, film evolves as a highly formalized and meticulously structured product defined above. Still, its rigorous structure and demands of the genre, which call forth for the regularity of composition and manner of deliverance, are akin to the poetic genre of literature.

The logical conclusion is that the further the cinematic product and its literary version drift apart in terms of a simple popular cultural product and elevated artistic expression, the closer they seem to be, which is a paradox still to be decoded in terms of their mutual contribution and generic interactions. Just as a work of literature, the author affirms, the film depends largely on the verbal matter, which may change as the film itself is being shot. Similar to a poem, which adheres to specific structural arrangement, the movie follows temporal limits and stylistic limitations, which often atone for its many-sided and multi-generic essence.

A closer examination of the film theory, which, being considerably younger than the literary one, still develops in its own right and poses definite problems to be solved by the film analysts, shows that structuralism can be successfully applied in redefining cinema related to literature in quite a number of ways. One of the recent approaches to treating film is by defining it as an amalgam of a variety of codes [Elsaesser, 8]. This intrinsic property of movies which distinguishes them as being multi-faceted also permits to denote the former in terms of the art of rhetoric, which gives, as the author considers, more space for pinpointing the basic hermeneutic frameworks of films as adaptations. Therefore it is possible to view film as a form of art in the light of the following definition: “The introduction of structuralism to film studies led to an object-focused approach to film, which regarded the film as a text to be examined and analyzed above and beyond any individual’s experience of it. Post-structural and cognitive theories combine subject- and object-focused studies by concentrating on inter-subjective, unconscious (or subconscious in the case of the cognitive film theory) responses to film. Whether cognitive or psychoanalytic, these film theorists begin from the spectator’s experience of the film” [Elsaesser, 9]. The basic assertion to be taken into account in this respect is certainly the possibility, though arguable, to equate any film with a text, which is what literature is mainly represented by. Since film is viewed as a stretch of thought or ideas framed as a coherent text, asking for the individual interpretation and examination, it can be categorized as parallel to a literary work. The latter allows film theorists to assume positions similar to those held by literary critics and pertain to the major hermeneutic principles of text analysis in defining the cinematic language of screen adaptations.

However, setting aside the arguments of supremacy or inferiority, often attributed to either the books or their film versions, it is of special interest to examine the ways these two genres interact and become mutually contributable. Cinematizing a literary classic may involve quite a number of generally required changes which owe themselves to the essential limitations of the cinematographic medium. These are defined by N. Hollands, one of the specialists in the field, as the difficulties in the perception of a movie: “Even the simplest linguistic tropes are difficult to transfer to film, the externalization of literary characters is dissatisfying, mental states cannot be as adequately represented by film as by language, the novel has three tenses, the film only one” [Hollands, 5]. The perception of a movie is challenged by the alleged simplifications, as many literary critics agree. Yet the significant changes introduced into the cinematic discourse tend to simplify the original matter grammatically and psychologically, which undoubtedly contributes to grasping the general content of the original version, modified as it may seem, in a summative manner.

The fact is that a number of adepts of film theory as a special branch of science look on the bright side of things in this respect, tending to regard the conflict of verbal figurativeness vs. audio-visual explicitness a breeding ground for debate in the favor of the film narrative. Apparently, the narrative essence of the latter is undisputed, since, as Shl. Rimon-Kennan puts it, “Newspaper reports, history books, novels, films, comic

strips, dance, pantomime, dance, gossips, psychoanalytic sessions are only some of the narratives which permeate our lives” [Rimmon – Kenan, 1]. The resulting assumption is that of the similar media employed to render the message in the literary works and their cinematic versions: both are narratives in their own right, with certain differences to be considered.

One of the essential divergences between the two is, as the author claims, that “the term narration suggests: (1) a communication in which the narrative as message is transmitted from addresser to addressee and (2) the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message. It is this that distinguishes narrative fiction from narratives in other media, such as film, dance or pantomime” [Rimon-Kennan, 2]. Consequently, whereas the medium of conveying the message in a piece of fiction is exclusively verbal, film undoubtedly gains a lot since its medium, in addition to verbal production, also involves the audio-visual output, facilitating perception. The narrative status of a film undeniably entails the stylistic simplification of verbal discourse and the characters have to be externalized, but whether these are demerits or advantages of a film version remains to be clarified.

Viewing film alongside the novel it bases on as two coterminous semantically bound media gives rise to a number of assumptions as to their obvious similarities rather than differences, which result in stating that “narratives and fictional world are key phenomenal entities created by others (novelists, filmmakers...) or ourselves through play, toys and games of make-believe. We enter such fictional worlds, and they affect our experience and behavior in short- or long-term perspectives” [Pesson, 17]. Clearly, both novel and film as two related genres can be commonly accepted as the phenomenological entities affecting humans and their outlooks to an equal degree of intensity, both being embodied in specific narrative modes.

Still the question of a proper definition attributed to the narrative mode employed to expose films and represent books as two complementary genera requires a more detailed examination in the light of the afore mentioned film theory. The property of a narrative as a phenomenon in the field of text analysis, to which, as proved above, both the novel and the film based on it undoubtedly belong, is the aptness to undergo a long process of evolution, presenting itself on the whole as a macrocosm and encompassing a multitude of microcosms accordingly. Hence, Th. Elsaesser establishes the following hierarchy in the field of film theory to pinpoint the basic features of this genre: “Generally speaking, these (narratological) models make a distinction between the macro-analytical level, which all narratives share, regardless of the medium and the material support (i.e. oral, written, film narratives) and the micro-analytical level, where one would be looking for the medium-specific stylistic devices and formal elements most pertinent to the analysis – in this case- of the cinematic discourse (the scale of the shot, camera movement and camera perspective, composition of the image, the transition from shot to shot, the possible relations between sound and image)” [Elsaesser, 41]. Obviously, the micro-analytical level of analyzing films will involve a sophisticated intermingling of the media that partake in its production, meaning the audio-visual channels which combine with the verbal presentation. Verbal narrative of a novel is mostly treated as an amalgam of stylistic devices and formal elements on the macro-level, as well as the paragon of a narrative whole. Thus, “a narrative is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium,, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure)” [Fudernik, 8]. It is without doubt that a verbal narrative is, as defined, prior to the combination of its audio-visual and verbal reverberations. Therefore its analysis focuses upon the textual strategies of identifying the verbal axes of the plot and the character imagery. When it comes to defining film adaptation as a narrative, other media meant to represent imagery and plot such as the sequences of shots, visual effects and sound are to be viewed as the analytical agents.

Much controversy arises at the point when film adaptation is suggested as a tool facilitating textual interpretation of a universally acknowledged work of literature. Films taken as counterparts or secondary sources are compared and no doubt related to the original books they are based upon. The factual distinction lies in the presentation modes inherent in their narrative systems. M. Fludernik, for example, considers the distinction among the three implications of the term ‘narrative’ quite helpful in the light of the given problem. The scientist draws on G. Genette’s outlook upon narrative as the act of the narrator, the text itself made of utterances, and finally, the story the narrator represents [Fludernik, 2]. In establishing the separation lines between novel as a classic and its adaptation as a modern version of the former the third interpretation comes in handy. “Different narratives focus on quite different aspects of the story; or, more precisely, the stories that we reconstruct from different narrative texts often complement each other”, as M. Fludernik affirms.

“By means of parody, or by reflecting current issues and concerns, they fill the gaps that earlier versions of the same story ('fable') left in their presentation, or simply rewrite the story” [Fludernik, 3]. Hence the film narrative as related to the earlier 'fable', a term coined by the scientist to refer to the primary source, represents a novel in the light of a more contemporary interpretation, related to either language changes or social aspects, often borrowing the subjects and plotlines to evince a notable idea which appeared implicit in the original version. Hence the 'rewritten fable' of a novel represented as a film narrative serves first and foremost a profitable message-defining tool which successfully complements the original version.

Since the issue of narrating the events exposed in a written classic is tightly bound with the possibility of interpreting it from a number of perspectives, one of them being offered by a film narrative, the presentation mode proper to both the genres, i.e. novels and adaptations, becomes the focus of the study in question. Much has been said about the advantages of the telling mode proper to the canonic literary pieces, where the verbal medium is the only channel available for perceiving a text as a unity of thought and expression. However, the narration mode of a film complementary to the novel is obviously different. B. McFarlane, one of the acclaimed film theorists, underlines the idea that the image rendered in the film adaptation appeals to the potential viewer in a way which constitutes a vantage point for further interpretation and analysis of the literary material. “One effect of this stress on the physical surfaces and behaviors of objects and figures is to de-emphasize the author's personal narrating voice so that we learn to read the ostensibly unmediated visual language of the later nineteenth-century novel ... Conrad and James further anticipate the cinema in their capacity for 'decomposing' a scene, for altering point of view so as to focus more sharply on various aspects of an object, for exploring a visual field by fragmenting it rather than by presenting it scenographically (i.e. as if it were a scene from a stage presentation)” [McFarlane, 5]. The fact that stands out clearly is that the visual fragmentation leading to definitive perception of a literary image in the XIX- th century novel is linked to the on-screen presentation of a fiction effigy. Fragmented and decomposed in certain cases, the visual image stemming from a literary source offers multilateral interpretive perspective and serves a powerful incentive for further analysis, which is oftentimes impossible in the original version.

As a natural consequence the interdependence of the two concomitant genres is frequently viewed in terms of the contemporary metaphoric interdependence between the verbal and audio-visual representation modes. To prove that the uniqueness of each genre taken separately does not impede either to intersect fruitfully, E. Norkus sets forward a relevant assumption about the tendency first observed in the twentieth century to reverse the essential polemics upon the primordial character of the verbal genre related to critical interpretation. Hence the author considers that “of course, visual metaphors play a fundamental, if not a constitutive role, in the structuralist narratology”. As Mosher and Nelles note “the points of view” are “a topic at the heart of narratology”. The most important advance in the analysis of narrative discourse was M. Bal's elaboration and refinement of G. Genette's narrative typology through the more literal interpretation of the “point of view” metaphor in the term “focalization”: the actor, using the acting as his material, creates the story; the focalizer, who selects the actions and chooses the angle from which to present them, with those actions creates the narrative” [Norkus, 174]. The ensuing conclusion is that apart from particularizing imagery, the visual presentation facilitates the process of distinguishing the viewpoint from which the action is reproduced on the screen, turning the verbal metaphors, virtually conceivable only in the written texts, into more accessible visual images, which represent figurative language involving human perception of the screen presentation.

In addition, cinematic versions of literature may represent a wide array of implicit overtones related to the general emotive appeal that the original source is meant to make. Accordingly, since “adapting literary works to film is, without doubt, a creative undertaking, the task requires a kind of selective interpretation along with the ability to recreate and sustain the established mood” [McFarlane, 7]. Mood, or tone as one of the essential components of text analysis, alongside with the process of visualizing and decomposing an image, is thus markedly recreated in a film adaptation, making direct appeal to the viewers. These appear as either the actual readers interested in seeing their favorite pieces cinematized or the potential readers, who may hypothetically address the original for the sake of comparing it with a movie in question. Tonal congruence of a film adaptation with the novel is thus another point favoring the usage of the former while interpreting literature.

In this respect another purpose of acquainting the viewers with the adaptations prior to reading and analyzing literature, as Th. Leitch insists, is to provide for cultural literacy and thus position the film version of a canonic fiction work as one of the textual links between visual and verbal narrative modes [Leitch, 8-9]. Still, this apparent applicability diminishes the value of adaptations as independent pieces: viewed only as

the chains in the cobweb of verbal narrative, they appear ancillary, and the priority of literature is somewhat reemphasized again.

Notwithstanding the fact, film adaptations, especially when treated as visual aids in the process of text revision or evaluation at language and literature courses in higher educational establishments, may exert quite a powerful impact upon the development of a future analyst's skills of practical approach to treating verbal matter. If literacy establishing intertextuality is taken as a touchstone helping to assert the status of film versions subjected to comparison with the literary masterpieces, cinematographic versions can also be integrated in the so-called post-reading stages of familiarizing the readers with the latter. Then it will be easier to attribute film adaptation analysis, with all due alterations of the initial fiction pieces, to developing the practical skills of rewriting and actively reinterpreting the 'fable' encountered in the original. Correspondingly, "active inferences greatly increase the ability to recall the particulars of a given abstract schema, ... reading not only to understand, but to consider, to compare, to criticize, to debate" [Leitch, 15]. Obviously, cinematic versions of literature thus exert greater contribution to interpreting the literary work in question than a mere discussion of the work read. By offering a rewriting, or reinterpretation, of the initial verbal material, they help spur discussions, perform comparative analysis and give grounds for further debate on the major themes, motifs, and message-identifying problems which emerge in the process of casting judgments upon the selective interpretation of the film watched.

Thus, the issue of cinematic adaptations becomes particularly relevant when the necessity to approach a literary work from a critical standpoint appears. Both literature and its film version belong to the sphere of literary study known as narrative theory, which relates to such fields of linguistic research as literary theory and criticism, poetics, semiotics and narrative theory. In the first place, the merit of adaptation departing from the initial source to a greater or lesser degree resides in narrating the fable of the primary literary matter in a complementary manner, tackling certain contextual or socially relevant issues depending on the period when the adaptation is produced and aired. Consequently, the two narrative modes inherent in books and their film versions, i.e. the verbal and audio-visual modes, stipulate the imagistic revival of a novel in its cinematic version, which allows for a broader presentation of the imagery itself. The macro-level of a verbal narrative is therefore supplemented by the micro-analytical techniques of its presentation in a film version, which adds audio-visual effects helping to stipulate the analysis of the plot and the characters.

Regardless of the amount of argument linked to the radical reshaping of the verbal matter in a cinematic product, the possibility to view the latter as a way of determining intertextuality in the process of text analysis can definitely be considered a helpful tool in the primary source interpretation. Finally, creative rewriting and comparative analysis skills can further develop by adjusting adaptations of canonic literary pieces as the visual and verbal aids in the process of teaching and interpreting literary sources.

Bibliography:

1. Elsaesser Thomas. *Studying Contemporary American Film*. - New York, Oxford, 2002.
2. Fludernick Monika. *An Introduction to Narratology*. - Routledge, London, New York, 2009.
3. Hollands Neil. *Adaptation of Novels into Film*. - Chapter Hill, North Carolina, 2002.
4. Norkus Zenonas. *JNT // Historical Narratives As Pictures: On Effective Affinities Between Verbal and Pictorial Representation*. - Eastern Michigan, Summer 2004, p.173-206.

Internet Sources:

1. Leitch Thomas. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*. - The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 2007.
http://books.google.com/books?id=4b6OA48mYrUC&printsec=frontcover&dq=film+adaptation+and+its+discontents&hl=ru&ei=N4uLTMyROs_54gatvbWVCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCsQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false
2. McFarlane Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. - Clarendon Press, Oxford. 1996.
http://books.google.com/books?id=TQiEQgAACAAJ&dq=mcfarlane+novel+to+film&hl=ru&ei=XouLTN-YLI674ga40tWMCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCgQ6AEwAA
3. Rimon-Kennan Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. - 2001, Routledge, London, http://books.google.com/books?id=P03WGZtED7oC&printsec=frontcover&dq=narrative+fiction+contemporary+poetics&hl=ru&ei=hLuLTL7YM82a4AbFy4yTCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false

Prezentat la 28.11.2010