

THE NARRATORIAL IMPACT ON FILM ADAPTATIONS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Alexandra SUDNIȚINA

Catedra Filologie Engleză

Prezentul articol este o analiză stilistică și contextuală a influenței naratorului asupra procesului de redare a evenimentelor în operele literare și adaptările lor cinematografice. Se discută posibilitatea determinării naratorului în scenariul cinematografic și procedeele decodării ale acestuia ca rezultat al analizei structurii dialogice a operei literare adaptate. De asemenea se efectuează analiza comparativă a tehnicilor de prezentare a naratorului în opera literară și felul de adaptare cinematografică. Sunt accentuate particularități stilistice, lexicale și structurale de identificare a prezenței naratorului în mediul audiovizual al adaptărilor cinematografice.

One of the chief perspectives established initially in any piece of written discourse is that of its voice, which refers to the tellability of the text, be it of literary or any other nature. The role of the narrative medium becomes crucial as soon as the reader immerses into the world of the story being told by the narrator, habitually defined as the one “who tells the story” [Fludernik, 5]. Thus the narrator’s angle, either broad or limited, is unavoidably reflected in the reader’s perception of the storyline and its stylistic framing. The fact standing out in this respect is that the immediacy of perceiving the narrative discourse in a piece of literature will primarily depend upon the slant that the narrative persona opts out for, ranging from detailed descriptions abounding in tropes and figures of speech to dry and condensed accounts of the events in question.

In accordance with the above criteria the two basic types of narratorial involvement have been defined and represented as the overt (easily identifiable and personalized) and covert (concealed) narrators [Fludernik, 32]. The lines of distinction are drawn on the basis of a higher or lower degree of involvement in exposing and commenting upon the events represented in the plot of a literary piece. This comprehensive criterion of either overtness or covertness permits to ascertain the uniqueness of literature as being heralded and framed by the presence of the narratorial medium with the appellative function foregrounding the narratee’s perception of the story proper.

Contrasted to novel as a literary genre, which has traditionally been defined as the verbal medium only, films make part of a different one. The majority of film and literary critics primarily assume that cinema is an essentially visual medium, which, as Th. Elsaesser construes, is noted for its “photographic recording capacity or its unique formal techniques that offer new way of seeing” [Elsaesser, 5]. The technical aspect related to identifying film as a specific narrative medium still permits to position it within the framework of audio-visual media, since it possesses its own “language, or a grammar, semantics and syntax” [Elsaesser, 21]. These traditional branches of linguistic inquiry, usually referred to defining the verbal medium of a literary narrative, are instrumental in representing film as its visual counterpart.

Apparently, the establishment of narrative persona in literature is a token of narratee’s perceptivity and analytical skills, since the former is present in a piece of literature and guides the reader through the intricacies of the plot whether noticed or imperceptible. However, the very question of either the presence or the absence of a filmic narrator in the traditional understanding of the term is usually the subject matter of controversy for the cinematic and literary critics. One of the basic assumptions put forward by M. Fabe, a specialist in film studies and critique, is that the visual will prevail over the verbal when it comes to distinguishing the narratorial voice and hence participation in unwinding the cinematic narration. The critic in question particularizes the narratorial impact in terms of the *mise-en-scene*, implying “the director’s choice of actors, the way the scene is lit, the choice of setting or set designs, props, costumes and make-up” [Fabe, 3-4]. Apart from the technicalities, which are inalienable features of film production and delivery, M. Fabe prioritizes “the imparting of the narrator’s point of view or commentary on the action” [Fabe, 8]. Still, the alleged information does not provide for any of the verbal specifics related to either the commentary as a potent narrative mode in both film and literature, or to the point of view rendered via verbal means. Instead, the focus of the research remains upon the visual expression of the director’s vision, which chiefly fulfills the narratorial function.

The assumption, traditional as it may seem, is noted for utter neglect of the film crew member behind the camera who determines the quality of the verbal output delivered by actors, i.e. the scriptwriter, responsible for

furnishing the initial directions as to dramatizing the scenes visually and acting them out verbally. Th. Elsaesser grants that scriptwriting as both a process and a product is part and parcel of analyzing film narrative, yet insists upon the idea of the visual medium challenging the verbal, as M. Fabre does. However, a significant distinction of the cinematic discourse levels comes to the fore: “macro-analytical level, which all narratives share, ...and micro-analytical level, where one would be looking for 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 transitions from shot to shot, the possible relations between sound and image)” [Elsaesser, 30]. Apparently, the narratorial medium is prevalently visual, yet the verbal component on the macro-analytical level serves a major incentive to probe into the issue of the script adaptation as the primary step towards distinguishing the narratorial presence as such, which, as it turns out, is typical of a film adaptation.

It is therefore logical to view the film adaptation as a two-step process of verbal medium reshaping, the first being its transformation, or dramatization, by the scriptwriter, and the second as the audio-visual finalization by all the members of the film crew and the rightful participants of the shooting process, as the directors, cameramen, editors, actors and many more.

Consequently, the first adaptation source to turn to would be the cinematic script providing the initialization of both the verbal and the visual interaction of the viewer with the audio-visual film narrative. The process takes place within the framework of cinematic discourse, understood by P. Pesson as one of the communicative artifacts alongside natural language and imagery: “Discourse is not associated with natural language and linguistics, but covers all media and communication modalities: imagery, utterances, gestures, written words, moving imagery, and other forms of representations” [Pesson, 22]. Hence the media discourse employed in cinematic adaptation finds its primary reflection in the script which renders the alleged compositional elements in the form of a script version mediating canonic literary pieces.

One of the exponential examples of a successful film adaptations of Jane Austen’s classic “Sense and Sensibility” adapted by Emma Thompson and directed by Ang Lee can be considered as the sample of analysis where the adaptation techniques are chiseled to perfection, with the transitions from the book to the script and then to the screen being quite successful and gaining considerable critical acclaim. The incipient passages of the novel, featuring an overt narrator, whose addressivity to the potential reader becomes explicit owing to the flashbacks, introduce the narratee into the Dashwood family history, abound in detail and comment, and are noted by elevated literary style. The following paragraphs may be considered exemplary:

“The family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex. *Their estate was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of their property*, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance. The late owner of this estate was a single man, who lived to a very advanced age, and who, for many years of his life, had a constant companion and housekeeper in his sister. *But her death, which happened ten years before his own, produced a great alteration in his home; for to supply her loss, he invited and received into his house the family of his nephew Mr. Henry Dashwood*, the legal inheritor of the Norland estate, and the person to whom he intended to bequeath it. In the society of his nephew and niece, and their children, the old gentleman's days were comfortably spent. His attachment to them all increased. *The constant attention of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded not merely from interest, but from goodness of heart, gave him every degree of solid comfort which his age could receive; and the cheerfulness of the children added a relish to his existence*” [Austen, 3].

The choice of the Past Perfect tense heralding the objective flashback is framed by the succession of the structural syntactical parallelisms and inversion (“*Their estate was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of their property*, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner...””) as well as the succession of trite metaphors (“*But her death, which happened ten years before his own, produced a great alteration in his home...*”, “*The constant attention of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood to his wishes, which proceeded not merely from interest, but from goodness of heart, gave him every degree of solid comfort...*”). The reader-friendliness of the overt narrator is thus chiefly secured by the objective flashback introduced by way of traditional exposition into the plotline of the novel. The retrospective insight into the family matters proceeds in the following way:

“By a former marriage, Mr. Henry Dashwood had one son: by his present lady three daughters. *To him, therefore, the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters; for their fortune,*

independent of what might arise to them from their father's inheriting that property, could be but small. *Their mother had nothing, and their father only seven thousand pounds in his own disposal*; for the remaining moiety of his first wife's fortune was also secured to her child, and he had only a life-interest in it. *The old gentleman died: his will was read; and, like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure*. He was neither so unjust, nor so ungrateful, as to leave his estate from his nephew; but he left it to him on such terms as destroyed half the value of the bequest” [Austen, 3]. The structural stylistic devices accelerating the narrative pace are again easily perceived: the inversion “to him, therefore, the succession ... was not so really important” is backed up by the structural parallelisms, ranging from “their mother had nothing, and their father only seven thousand pounds in his own disposal” to “the old gentleman died: his will was read”. The analepsis ends in Dashwood’s death, which appears as the event enticing the moments of complication. Thus the macro-narrative literary discourse level is noted for the traditional techniques of exposing the events.

The script adaptation deviates from the monologic flashback structure: in the scenario the dialogue among the family members is represented, the analepsis is altogether absent, and the character psychology is partly revealed owing to the scriptwriter’s remarks, which atone for the narratorial overttness. The following extract can be put forward as an example:

MR DASHWOOD

Let me speak to John alone.

She nods quickly and he smiles at her with infinite tenderness.

MR DASHWOOD

Ah, my dear. How happy you have made me.

MRS DASHWOOD makes a superhuman effort and smiles back. She allows THOMAS to help her out. She passes JOHN DASHWOOD as he enters, presses his hand, but cannot speak. JOHN takes her place by the bed.

JOHN

Father...

MR DASHWOOD summons his last ounces of energy and starts to whisper with desperate intensity.

MR DASHWOOD

John, you will find out soon enough from my will that the estate of Norland was left to me in such a way as prevents me from dividing it between my families.

JOHN blinks. He cannot quite take it in.

JOHN

Calm yourself, Father. This is not good for you [Thompson, 3].

It becomes apparent that the dialogue emerging from the novel adaptation re-enacts the missing elements of the exposition which are given a mere summative account. The flashback is truly missing, yet the dialogic sequence brings into focus Mr. Dashwood’s character by way of the trite lexical figures as the epithet “infinite tenderness” and the following metaphor “summons his last ounces of energy and starts to whisper with desperate intensity”. His son’s perplexity and nervousness, immediately setting a tone of anxiety and atmosphere of desperate expectation, is rendered successfully by indicating the body language of the character in question: “John blinks. He cannot quite take it in”. Accordingly, the overttness of the scriptwriter, who obviously serves a feasible narratorial alternative, recreating the literary piece, is manifested in retaining the elevated literary hue of the dialogue, which, defying the analeptic exposition, furnishes the potential audience with the typified character traits instead.

The cinematic version allows the actors dramatize the dialogue following the lines indicated in the script exactly: yet a series of close shots serves the incipit to the film narration, casting light first upon John Dashwood, and then his dying father, which brings into focus the narratorial cinematic viewpoint. The background music, serving a creative substitute for the voice-over, sustains the atmosphere established in the script, whereas the

camera angle, another component of the narrative miscellany, focused upon the shadows on the walls of the perishing estate owner, intensifies the general tone of the scene. The filmic narrative coherence, which in most cases is more or less overt, is therefore attained owing to the micro-narrative level of cinematic discourse, where the score, the camera-work and the decorum, coupled with the actors' performance and shot succession help to achieve the effect desired. The stylistic shading is consequently rendered by the costumes and scenic setting of the room where the action evolves. This, in its turn, provides for the visual testimony of the epoch depicted.

As a result, the overt narratorial impact upon relating the events in a piece of literature, this being a novel or any other subgenre, can be perceived and defined from a number of standpoints when adapted for the script version of a film-to-be. The indices of an overt narrative, as the eloquence and exquisiteness of style, abounding in literary tropes, commentary and analepses, inherent addressivity to the narratee, and finally the prevailing monological discourse form are reshaped into dialogues, often following the stylistic trend established. The storyline itself turns into a dialogic exchange, with a number of narrative anachronisms omitted. The presence of the narratorial persona can be traced to the scriptwriter's remarks and directions, which frequently refer to the initial source by imbibing elements of its stylistic shading. The other stage of adapting a canonic piece of fiction is the actual process of shooting the movie and its final product, which is the film version of a novel. Whereas in the previous two versions of a piece the verbal medium is the chief source of conveying information, the audio-visual medium of a film dictates its own limitations imposed upon the work in question.

Consequently, the narrating function is attributed to the combined effort exerted on the part of the director, the scriptwriter, the play of actors, camera angles and shot successions, to let alone the background music and the score, which adduce emotive coloring to the film narration. Thus, whereas in both the original and its script version the verbal medium permits to decode and determine narratorial overtness, the cinematic adaptation involves the miscellaneous camera, directing and performing techniques, as well as at least two leading media, which are sound and vision, to indicate and expose the narrating processes.

Bibliography:

1. Elsaesser Th. *Studying Contemporary American Film*. - New York, Oxford, 2002.
2. Fabe M. *Closely Watched Film: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*. - University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2004.
3. Fludernick M. *An Introduction to Narratology*. - Routledge, London, New York, 2009.
4. Pesson P. *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery*. - Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 2003.

Literary Sources:

1. Austen J. *Sense and Sensibility*. – London, Wordsworth Editions, 2000.
2. Thompson E. - *Sense and Sensibility*. - 1994.
3. <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Sense-and-Sensibility.html>.

Media Sources:

- Lee A.- *Sense and Sensibility*. - UK, Columbia Pictures, 1995.

Prezentat la 28.11.2010