

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADAPTING PLAYS

STUART BURGE'S FILM ON OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

A importância de adaptar peças

O filme de Stuart Burge sobre “A importância de ser prudente”, de Oscar Wilde

Maria do Rosário Lupi Bello¹

Abstract: This essay is an attempt to tackle some of the fundamental issues related with the ontological differences between drama and film, namely the ability of the former to represent action and the aim of the second to relate sequential events. Through the use of some examples selected from the film adaptations of Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* our aim is to confront some of the topics distinguishing these two forms of art: pastness versus presentness, dramatic collision versus sequentiality, mimesis versus narrativity, representation versus showing.

Keywords: Drama. Film. Dramatic collision. Narrativity. Adaptation.

Resumo: Este artigo consiste numa tentativa de tratar algumas questões fundamentais relacionadas com a diferença ontológica entre teatro e cinema, nomeadamente no que diz respeito à capacidade do primeiro de representar a acção e o objetivo do segundo de relatar a sequencialidade dos eventos. Por meio de exemplos colhidos das adaptações cinematográficas da peça de Oscar Wilde *The Importance of Being Earnest*, procura-se confrontar tópicos que distinguem as duas formas de arte: a característica de passado *versus* a dimensão de presente, a colisão dramática *versus* a sequencialidade, a mimesis *versus* a narratividade, a dimensão de representação *versus* a de “mostração”.

Palavras-chave: Teatro. Cinema. Colisão dramática. Narratividade. Adaptação.

¹ Doutora em Estudos Portugueses e mestre em Estudos Anglo-Portugueses pela Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Professora da Universidade Aberta de Lisboa, onde tem leccionado nas áreas: Estudos Fílmicos, Teoria da Literatura, Cultura Portuguesa e Estudos Interartes. E-mail: rosario@uab.pt

David Mamet is known not just for his work as an actor and playwright but also for his witty essays on drama. One of his graphic *dicta* on the experience and essence of theatre, as opposed to the experience of listening to a lecture, is: “the drama is essentially people stuck in an elevator” (Mamet: 2010, 20). With this example, he is trying to make us understand the capacity of drama to unite people together in a common and unforgettable experience: “Those of us who have been in similar extremity cherish the experience the rest of our lives, for as trying and inconvenient as it was at the time, we remember the unity of communal endeavor and value this cessation of our mundane worries. It was cleansing to experience that we could put aside the so pressing activities of the day and find that the world went on in any case, while our new, small tribe searched for a solution to its communal problem”. For him theatre is essentially a “communal absorption in the hunt” (Mamet: 2010, 21). We are predators who “hunt for security, fame, happiness, compensation, et cetera” (Mamet, 2010, 23).

In other words, we might say that the essence of theatre is action, or – even more accurately – plot, the temporal structure that ties incidents together, that gives consistency to action, thus involving the audience in a common desire to pursue their “hunting”, to attain a specific goal, usually the one wished for by the protagonist(s).

E. M. Forster notes, “In the drama all human happiness and misery does and must take the form of action, otherwise its existence remains unknown, and this is the great difference between the drama and the novel” (Edgar: 18). And what happens with movies? Cinema is a narrative form of art in so far as it gives shape, either directly or indirectly, to a specific form of storytelling – and therefore to action, to the human experience of temporality. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur states that this is precisely the factor which allows the understanding of the literary phenomenon as well. Human experience of time is, in some way, pre-narrative, and if it weren’t so we wouldn’t be able to understand any form of narrative whatsoever. Far from being a mere linguistic phenomenon, a simple display of sequential facts, or even a literary strategy, narrative is a cognitive “tool”: it shows the perception of temporal flux as an evidence of change, through the successive record of events. This record of sequentiality manifests a specific apprehension of reality, and is therefore the sign of a particular way of *knowledge* (according to its Sanskrit root, *gnâ*). In the epigraph to a chapter on narrativity, Monika Fludernik

emphasizes the experiential dimension of narrative and states (quoting Edward Branigan): “[...] *narrative is a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience*. More specifically, narrative is a way of organising spatial and temporal data into a cause-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle and end that embodies a judgement about the nature of events as well as demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events.”²

So, the first aspect I would like to outline here is the fact that narrative is something other than plot, something more than action; it is a phenomenon that has to do with the apprehension of reality, with a specific sort of “judgement about the nature of events”. As Fludernik holds: “The (post) structuralist obituary on narrative of course conceptualises narrative as plot. It is only by redefining narrative on the basis of consciousness that its continuing relevance can be maintained.”³ In the same way, Ricoeur repeatedly explains: “To tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes”⁴.

Is there, then, a fundamental, ontological difference between the way drama and film deal with the human experience of temporality? Should we speak of plot in the case of drama and of narrative in the case of film? In this paper, I intend to tackle some of the fundamental questions raised by this vast problem and to try to demonstrate two or three of these aspects, by giving a few examples of this specific case of theatrical adaptation.

Hegel’s requirement for the definition of the world of epics is his famous concept of “totality of objects”. He considers narrative to be essentially a means of interaction between each particular action and the world around it, which he calls “its substantial basis”. As Lukács explains when analysing Hegel’s theory, “an epic work which presents only the inner life of man with no living interaction with the objects forming his social and historic environment must dissolve into an artistic vacuum without contours or substance”⁵. The relationship between narrative and the world is a central issue, not a secondary one. Narration is useful for the creation

² Fludernik, p. 26.

³ Fludernik, p. 27.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Time”, in *On Narrative*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 165-186 (p. 174).

⁵ Georg Lukács, “The historical novel” in *Theory of the Novel – a historical approach. A critical anthology*, ed. by Michael McKeon (New Jersey: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 219-269 (p. 222).

of the world, as Wolfgang Kayser would put it⁶. Of course that drama also aims at a total embodiment of the life process, Lukács alerts; yet Hegel uses another concept, “total movement”, to define its nature.

This totality, however, is concentrated round a firm centre, round the dramatic collision. It is an artistic image of the system, so to speak, of those human aspirations which, in their mutual conflict, participate in this central collision. “Dramatic action”, says Hegel, “therefore rests essentially upon colliding actions, and true unity can have its basis only in total movement.”⁷

Context is therefore a fundamental dimension of narrative and desirably a dispensable element in drama - that is why Oliver Parker, when adapting the same play in 2002, explained he decided to “add a bit of background to the characters”. Narrative aims to create a “possible world”, whereas drama aims to involve us in the dramatic nature of this world, in the fact that struggle is the condition of our existence. While a novel displays a sequence of events that gives visibility to the experience of temporality, i.e., to change, by putting the fact of transformation before our eyes (in this sense narrative is the visibility of transformation), in a play our attention is mainly concentrated on each scene in itself, and not so much in its sequential implications. It is, as André Bazin put it, that the main force working in narrative text is of centrifugal nature (with an outward direction) whereas in drama it is essentially a centripetal action, concentrating everything in the scene itself.

It is most interesting to listen to what Käte Hamburger, the German philosopher and literary critic, says about the ontological change occurring in the passage of a play to a film. She speaks of the phenomenon occurring when a drama is captured by a film camera: “It is undoubtedly not by chance that film companies prefer to film novels. Novel offers a better basis for cinema than drama. [...] Cinematographic image works as narrative function, it can as well build a global image of the respective narrated world. It can, in the same way, compose particularities in a whole. [...] Overall, the narrating force in cinema is so great that the epic factor seems to be more decisive for its classification than the dramatic one. [...] The moving image is narrative and it seems to render film an epic and not a dramatic form. A filmed drama becomes epic.” (Hamburger, 1974: 161.)

⁶ Kayser, p. 390.

⁷ Lukács, pp. 219-269 (p. 222).

As a matter of fact, a director like Manoel de Oliveira, who is reputed to produce “theatrical films”, defends cinema’s independence of drama from the point of view of formal matter, since theatre is physical, living matter and cinema is its “ghost”, underlining that film adds to theatre the capacity of *fixing* the image *in time*⁸. But the result is cinema, not ‘filmed theatre’. The mere fact of the intervention of the camera, with its capacity of recording temporal sequentiality, introduces a new logic both in the nature and in the reception and experience of film, as Hamburger explains.

Let me stress some of the fundamental differences before looking at the case in hand, the adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

David Edgar quotes Dr Johnson’s dictionary, where a play is defined as “a poem in which the action is not related, but represented”. This very concise definition indirectly establishes a fundamental difference, explained by Plato: when the action is purely mimetic, the poet does not relate, since he is hidden and speaks through the voice(s) of other(s) – such is the case of tragedy and comedy, represented by actors. When the poet assumes himself as narrator, as in the case of dithyrambic verse, we are before what Plato calls “pure narrative” (“simples narrativa”). In epics (*epopeia*) Plato considers that there is a mixed situation, involving both narration and mimesis.

Words are, in any case, the fundamental basis of theatre. To quote Mamet: “the purpose of staging is to draw the attention of the audience to the person speaking”. “What drama shows us – most of the time – is what people are saying to other people, which usually means what they are doing” (Edgar, 2011:18) Doing things with words – that is the nature of theatre. In cinema, many other aspects – apart from dialogue – may become the centre of attraction, by the use of various techniques such as zooming or extreme close-ups of some minute detail. David Edgar also distinguishes theatre from literature by saying that, as Goethe puts it, “the dramatic character acts, while the novelist’s character suffers”. Theatre is, so to say, an “art of crisis”, whereas literature, like cinema, is essentially an art of “gradual development”. That is why concentration is a fundamental aspect of drama, and not necessarily one of novel or film.

⁸ Antoine de Baecque; Jacques Parsi, *Conversas com Manoel de Oliveira*. Porto: Campo das Letras Editores, 1999. p. 81.

Another important aspect deserves attention: due to the mediation of the camera, the film spectator establishes a different relationship with the events than an audience does with dramatic action. He becomes a real *spectator*, in the literal sense of the word, once his main function is to see (*speculare*). He is not summoned to “action”, if we may say so – as in the case of dramatic experience, which is the space of performance, where things are *done* with words, words that can (or should, if we consider the classical postulate) lead to cathartic experience; instead, he *watches* events from a specific point of view, from a distance, adopting the necessary perspective, a perspective he shares with the film director, that enables him to know and judge.

Of course that the lack of tri-dimensionality in movies and fiction is also part of the question. In a play this tri-dimensionality, given by the physical presence of the actors, approaches theatre from reality and creates a particular relationship between the audience and the characters, who are flesh and bone, sharing their experiences simultaneously with the people present in the room. Steve Waters says that Philip Larkin once wrote how badly he felt for leaving a play at midpoint. He said it “feels an especially transgressive act, like playing truant from school, as it breaks the contract of shared theatrical time” (71).

The last aspect I would like to tackle before giving some examples is precisely the question of time. David Mamet (2010: 152) observes, “the great mystery in the performing arts is time”. David Edgar (2011: 157), on the other hand, underlines the importance that time pressure may give to a specific scene: “It’s a kind of miracle how time pressure can intensify a scene, even if the pressuring factor is peripheral to its course”. Distinguishing literature from cinema according to the importance of temporality, Steve Waters recalls Becket’s sentence “all theatre is waiting” and comments: “only music and cinema have time at their core to the same degree as plays” (Waters, 2010: 71-72).

Yet film renders time in a very specific way, as we have seen, and it can manipulate it much more easily than can drama, through montage, camera movements and other techniques. Film has a natural kinetic energy. In theatre “tempo” is the key word, “the motor of a play is set to the tempo of the story they are telling”, Waters notes (Waters, 2010: 72); and he stresses, “the dream of real time haunts all theatre”, i.e., “the desire to tell a story without apparent artifice or cheating, to present to the audience events that seem to function without the intervention of director or writer”. (Waters, 2010: 73).

In the movies, the mere fact of the director having to choose a perspective (an angle) for every shot implies his intervention, whether or not the spectator becomes aware of this. So real time in cinema is the ultimate artifice, the hiding of one of its most intrinsic characteristics. Cinema always wishes to recapture past time, to fix it, so that its meaning can be fully grasped, and in doing so it separates itself from life, since time is by definition unstoppable, intangible. In this sense cinema is like a fight against death, against the dramatic irreversibility of the passage of events that occur in time.

Although cinema also establishes undeniable relations with drama – essentially through its spatial feature of *mise en scène* or framing, to use the specific word in cinema, and also because of the *dramaticity* of events, as Kayser would stress – the truth is that its most profound characteristics have to do with its specific temporal nature and therefore imply a narrative dimension and organisation.

How much of this can we see in Stuart Burges’s 1986 BBC adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s 1895 play *The Importance Of Being Earnest*? The play originally bore the subtitle *A trivial comedy for serious people*. In the story the protagonists, Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing, maintain fictitious personae and names in order to escape their social obligations. “Jack has invented an imaginary brother, Earnest, whom he uses as an excuse to escape from his dull home in the country and frolic in town. Algernon uses a similar technique, only in reverse. His imaginary friend, Bunbury, provides a convenient and frequent method of taking adventures in the country. However, their deceptions eventually cross paths, resulting in a series of crises that threaten to spoil their romantic pursuits: Jack of his love Gwendolen Fairfax, and Algernon of his belle Cecily Cardew”.

Although explicitly wishing to stick as close as possible to Wilde’s text and even to the theatrical atmosphere of the play – something which does not happen for instance in Oliver Parker’s 2002 film version, which is admittedly cinematographic and thus explicitly adopts typical narrative procedures, as for instance introducing the atmosphere and action of a detective story, with Algernon running away from police agents because of his debts or Jack investigating in libraries in order to discover his own identity - Burge cannot escape proving Hamburger’s dictum: “a filmed drama becomes epic”.

In the beginning of the play Algernon hears his friend Jack (who leads Town people to think his name is Ernest) mention the address of his protégée Cecily. Rapidly formulating a plan to meet Cecily, whose beauty he has been hearing about, he notes the address on the starched cuff of his shirtsleeve.

Due to the movement of the camera and to the following close-up we are led to see something that a theatrical audience would not be able to observe so well. Therefore, a detail difficult to convey on a stage acquires a greater importance on the screen. This simple difference produces a more or less conscious awareness of the fact that we are looking at something which is not merely *happening* before our eyes, but rather being *related* to us by somebody. Although invisible, there is some kind of *narrator* telling us this story in the way he chooses to. Wim Wenders speaks of the mysterious communication happening in movies, where “one voice speaks to the audience, just as had been the case with Homer, the narrator of the original stories, when he recited his *Odyssey* and his other great stories. Cinema still has that same magical relationship between the teller of tales and his listener, though now the listener is also a watcher, who both sees and hears.” Drama has been changed into narrative, into a form of epic expression – the poet has ceased to give room to pure imitation, as Aristotle would say, and has come out showing his own presence more or less overtly. In Parker’s film this presence is much more evident, namely in the rhythm of the action, favoured by constant and marked camera movements, and in the constant change of place (from interior to exterior sceneries and then back to rooms, bars and hotels).

Another example has to do with the feeling of sequentiality happening in the film and proving its narrative nature. When there is a spatial change in the theatre it necessarily implies a temporal cut, creating a feeling of independence among different scenes. But in the movies montage can produce this cut in such a discrete and quick manner that different actions taking place in distinct places are felt as sequential, cause and effect events, much more than separate actions with a unity and independence of their own, relying mainly on impact, on dramatic collision. This is precisely what happens when the action suddenly moves from the interior of Mr Moncrieff’s Town home to the garden of Jack Worthing.

In this rapid movement, time has elapsed as if its influence was not decisive. The film tends to give us the feeling of a permanent present, it connects the past to the present with an ease almost impossible to achieve on stage, where the whole battle is to control the present moment. David

Edgar speaks of the pastness of the present in the theatre (since time runs through our fingers without chance of being recovered – as in real life), and we might speak of the presentness of the past on film (since film images bring back past events as if they have become present again – and we may come back to them over and over again).

Thirdly, the passage from a play to the screen introduces a narrative perspective which has strong implications in the way the work is received by the audience. During a dialogue, it is always important that the public can follow the conversation easily. This implies the use of specific techniques on stage, namely in the positions adopted by the actors and in the use of their voices. When adapted to film, dialogues tend to take place in a way closer to that of real life, since the camera can supply the conditions lacking on stage, by approaching the faces of the persons speaking and using a typical procedure that tends to imitate the natural perspective one has during a conversation, namely shot – reverse shot. This can be proved in moments when important dialogues are taking place.

Thought, for instance, can very well be conveyed in film through voice over, avoiding solutions like the asides and the soliloquies, which are tolerated on stage, where naturalism is not a condition, but are felt as artificial techniques, in the negative sense of the word, when used on the screen (as indeed is the case of this adaptation, which might be said to follow the play too closely, both in style and in atmosphere). In Oliver's version, we can actually see Cecily's romantic thoughts, through the use of a subjective point of view, which avoids words spoken aloud and gives us access to intimate imagery, which is an established cinematographic procedure, obviously impossible to achieve in a play.

To conclude: it would be too simplistic to oppose the specific qualities of each form of art (pastness versus presentness, dramatic collision versus sequentiality, mimesis versus narrative) as if those were total separate, untouchable worlds. The question is, though, one of emphasis: even in a case like this one, where the director did not want to mark the differences between the play and the film – as is exactly the same case in the 1952 film by Anthony Asquith, both versions wishing to maintain the canonical atmosphere conveyed by a classical work, something the BBC evidently treasures – we can confirm (especially after having seen the play) how each scene creates a centrality of its own on stage and how sequentiality and point of view acquire a fundamental importance on screen, where the whole context of the story is shown, not represented.

Northrop Frye⁹ sums up these distinctions by using the concept of the “radical of presentation” to distinguish among different genres: words may be acted in front of a spectator; they may be spoken in front of a listener; they may be sung or chanted; or they may be written for a reader”. And he adds: “The basis of generic criticism in any case is rhetorical, in the sense that genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public”. If we consider film as a “text” in the broad, semiotic sense of the word, and try to apply the principle of the radical of presentation to it, then we verify the complexity of the filmic object: although characters are presented to us “directly”, as in the theatre (and differently from literary fiction), they are subject to camera mediation, in this sense approaching the situation of fiction more than the one of drama; although words are mainly “recited” to the audience, as in epic literature, they quite often appear in written form as well. It is no wonder that André Bazin spoke about the impurity of film, its natural tendency to absorb other art features and forms, as if it could only exist by creating a new artistic status, a new, hybrid form. That is why Paulo Filipe Monteiro places cinema “at the transversality of drama and epics”. Theatrical adaptations are particularly good examples of such a phenomenon, as I hope I have been able to demonstrate in this paper, by indirectly showing why theatrical plays are not so easily and frequently adapted for the screen as novels and short stories, a point/question I intend to develop with further research in this joint project.

References

Baecque, Antoine; Parsi, Jacques (1999). **Conversas com Manoel de Oliveira**. Porto: Campo das Letras Editores.

Edgar, David (2010). **How Plays Work**. London: Nick Hern Books.

Fludernik, Monika (1996). **Towards a “Natural” Narratology**. London: Routledge.

Frye, Northrop (1990). **Anatomy of Criticism**. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hamburger, Käte (1974). **A lógica da criação literária**. São Paulo: Perspectiva.

⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 246-247.

Kayser, Wolfgang (1976). **Análise e interpretação da obra literária**. Introdução à Ciência da Literatura. Coimbra, Arménio Amado, editor (Tít. Orig. *Das Sprachliche Kunstwerk*, 1. ed. 1948).

Lukács, Georg (2000). “**The historical novel**” in *Theory of the Novel* – a Historical Approach. A Critical Anthology, ed. by Michael McKeon (New Jersey: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 219-269.

Mamet, David (2010). **Theatre**. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Ricoeur, Paul (1981). “**Narrative Time**” in *On Narrative*. Ed. By W.J.T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 165-186.

Tarkovsky, Andrei (1996). **Sculpting in Time**. The Great Russian Filmmaker discusses his Art. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Waters, Steve (2010). **The Secret Life of Plays**. London: Nick Hern Books.

Filmography

Burge, Stuart (Director). (1986). **The Importance of Being Earnest** [Filme].

Parker, Oliver (Diretor). (2002). **The Importance of Being Earnest** [Filme].