



Mrs. Dalloway and its Cinematic Adaptations

Sarika, Research Scholar

Department of English, Kurukshetra University

Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* in the context of its cinematic adaptations with special reference to the movie *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham, which also happens to be the working title adopted by Woolf when composing the novel. While keeping in mind the notion of "axiomatic superiority" of literature and fidelity criticism, an attempt is made to understand how the fluidity of time and eternal flux of psyche employed by Virginia Woolf in the novel gets reflected through visual, aural and intradiegetic and extradiegetic means employed by Cunningham in the movie and its implications.

Key Words: Axiomatic Superiority of Literature, Adaptations, Stream of Consciousness, Logophilia, Iconophobia, Fidelity Criticism.

Mrs. Dalloway is a 1925 modernist novel by Virginia Woolf that details a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a fictional high-society woman in post-First World War England. Created from two short stories, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" and the unfinished "The Prime Minister," the novel addresses Clarissa's preparations for a party she will host that evening. With an interior perspective, the story travels forward and back in time and in and out of the characters' minds to construct an image of Clarissa's life and of the inter-war social structure. Her life is paralleled with that of Septimus Warren Smith, a working-class veteran who has returned from the First World War bearing deep psychological scars. All of the action takes place on a single day in June and within this period Woolf has spread wide, breadthwise, and plunged down far into the psychology of her characters. By simultaneously emphasizing the chiming of the hours and the ubiquity of past memories, she ends up showing the fluidity of time, which can be both linear (progression of hours) and circular (constant presence of past) at once. The opening of the window in the beginning of the novel is one such event. Clarissa opens the windows into her personal past. Woolf goes on to suggest the many 'fleeting shades', the multitudes of emotions passing through the single moment. The "noise of the hinges" and "the fresh flavour of the June morning" set off to associate a visual memory of her youth. She recalls the time at Bourton, when she was eighteen years old,

"What a lark! What a plunge!... She had burst open the French window and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course... looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, 'Musing among the vegetables?'... Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull." (Woolf, 17)

Virginia Woolf found that the traditional method of writing novel adopted by H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy failed to embody her perspective regarding human life. Consequently she was engaged in search of a literary design which would adequately convey her vision of inner reality and the eternal flux of human psyche. This, she found could be



appropriately realized by the stream-of-consciousness technique. It refers to the term coined by William James in his book *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). It is applied specifically to refer to a mode of narration that undertakes to reproduce the full spectrum and continuous flow of a characters mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, expectations, feelings, and random associations. Her narrative approach has also been described as cinematic, because Woolf utilizes techniques such as close-ups, flashbacks and montage.

Woolf wrote in her essay on "The Cinema" (1926), in which she declared that this medium "has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" (Woolf, 2). This essay has been cited as an example of how logophilia has corrupted the study of the film adaptation; however, such a stance has misappropriated Woolf's writing. She acknowledges that the cinema is still an immature art-form and is yet to master its tools, but it is the anticipation of something new that excites her. Just as her earlier essays on fiction demanded that writers experiment with finding a new means of representation, Woolf's essay on the cinema is critical of an art-form whose potential remains unexplored and calls upon the filmmaker to embrace the unknown. Marleen Gorris' film *Mrs. Dalloway* which is an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* makes an attempt to do justice to this art form. It is a 1997 British drama film, directed by Marleen Gorris, scripted by Eileen Atkins and stars Vanessa Redgrave as Clarissa Dalloway. The interest among modernist writers in unreliable narrators, psychologically complex characters, fragmented perceptions, and mythical allusions are devices that rarely translate smoothly into film without technical complication or dilution of creative intent. The adaptation of modernist novels, therefore, becomes something more than just the transposition of novel to film.

This brings us to examine adaptation studies before moving to the movie. For some people, as cultural theorist Robert Stam has argued, literature will always have "axiomatic superiority" over any cinematic adaptation of it because of its seniority as an art form. This hierarchy also has something to do with what he calls "iconophobia" (the suspicion of the visual) and the concomitant "logophilia" (the love of the word as sacred). Fidelity criticism dominated early adaptation criticism and produced an imbalanced judgement of the film adaptation in which the latter was to be judged solely in relation to the reproduction of the former, its origin, the original. In this schema, the novel is the "Original", the film a reproduction, a copy. John Orr's description of the film adaptation as a "picture-book" echoes how adaptation was defined in terms of what the film replicates or, more often than not, what it does not. The adaptation as "picture-book" also invokes a sense of inferiority: the phrase "picture-book" belongs almost exclusively to the realm of children's literature. The adaptation, then, is conceived of as both a childish reproduction and an inferior, populist, version of the high-brow original. Fidelity criticism not only dictated that a "successful" film adaptation must faithfully reproduce the novel, but its literary prejudices introduced misconceptions of film as an inferior, wholly visual medium.

Adaptations, can take numerous forms; they are more than just novel-to-film relationships and the manner in which they identify or acknowledge the adapting relationship that defines them as adaptations occurs across a broad spectrum. The practice of film adaptation does not always readily acknowledge its source text, and it is useful to view adaptation as a relationship that is both overtly and covertly expressed. Marleen Gorris' *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, overtly identifies itself as an adaptation through its use of Woolf's title and retention of



narrative structure as well as reproducing period details such as costume and setting. Many recent film adaptations openly credit the source novel, explicitly referencing it in the film's title for instance Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* or in the opening title sequence when the source text and author's name are often preceded by "based upon", as seen in many of Disney's film adaptations. Commonly, adaptations retain their source's title, whilst others feature titular alterations, but these often function as a nominal homage to the source. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* nominally acknowledges its source: it is the working title adopted by Woolf when composing *Mrs. Dalloway* and an allusion to the novel's autobiographical intertexts, such as Woolf's letters and diaries. By contrast, some film adaptations do not make explicit their status as an adaptation. It is necessary to conceive of adaptation in terms of the multiple, intertextual relationships that contribute: the central relationship between source and adaptation; the influence of criticism; or something other, and far less "textual", like the presence of icons or figures, such as an author's or actor's public persona(e) or a cultural construction such as the figure of the hysteric, which bring with them various political associations.

In the movie, Woolf's literary impressionism is brought forth through the use of the visual (editing and framing) as well as the aural, including the verbal (voice-over) and the non-verbal (the scored soundtrack). Gorris's film adaptation employs its non-verbal soundtrack in its stylistic imitation of Woolf's literary impressionism, and both intradiegetic soundtrack and the extradiegetic musical scoring contribute to the film's representation of Septimus's impressions of the world he inhabits.

The skywriter sequence thus juxtaposes a conventional point-of-view of the present with a soundtrack that draws from different temporal and spatial locations to create a highly subjective representation which echoes Woolf's rejection of conventional narrative time and space in favour of a literary impressionism that follows its characters' mental meanderings across temporal and spatial divides. In contrast to the flashback which this film employs elsewhere the impressionistic soundtrack and conventional point-of-view shot/reverse-shot invites the audience to experience the disorientating juxtaposition in a manner akin to Septimus's own hysterical experience. The skywriter's message is initially presented not by the film's visual representation of it, but aurally, through a character's vocalisation of the message. The music, subsumed by the increasing volume of the aeroplane engines, vanishes from the scene as Clarissa is similarly absented. The simultaneous departure of the extradiegetic musical soundtrack and Clarissa from the scene further points to the former being an aural signifier of the scene's focalisation, operating in addition to the film's more conventional shot-reverse-shot sequences. When the aeroplane exits the top of frame it disappears both visually and aurally, as the sound of its engines also vanishes. The impressionistic nature of the intradiegetic soundtrack is illustrated from the moment the aeroplane disappears through to its reappearance. The close-up shot of the pigeons cuts to a medium shot of Septimus and Rezia Warren Smith sitting on a park bench with pigeons at their feet. Septimus, engrossed by the pigeons below, reaches for a paper and pen from his jacket whilst his wife huffs at his behaviour before glancing upwards. Thus, it is Septimus's feet in the prior shot and he can now be attributed with the focalisation which resulted in the earlier absence of the aeroplane's engines. Septimus's behaviour indicates he is oblivious to his surroundings and therefore unaware of the aeroplane overhead. He is engrossed in observing the birds at his feet; his gestures are imitative of the pigeon's behaviour and, as he nods and cocks his head in response



to their cooing, he is visually aligned with the birds, arguably engaging with them. The aeroplane has not left the narrative, rather, it does not make an impression upon Septimus whose experience of the world in that moment is of the pigeons, and nothing else. The absence of the aeroplane, both aurally and visually, not only suggests he is entirely focused on the birds, but it also puts him at odds with the other characters who are all seen to be caught up in observing the aeroplane. This introduces Septimus's position as other, as being at odds with the world he inhabits.

The camera returns again to the close-up of Septimus who has become increasingly animated, stating "There is no death. The birds they sing it in Greek!" whilst shaking his head in excitement. The intradiegetic noises of the aeroplane and the pigeons increase in volume, intensifying the intradiegetic soundtrack. A sudden explosion fires, followed by a rapid cut to a medium shot of Septimus and Rezia; Septimus clearly startled, looks anxiously over his shoulder whilst Rezia sits nonchalantly, if not a little fed up, oblivious to the sudden aural commotion impressing itself on her husband. The soundtrack continues to crescendo, becoming increasingly disorientating as it is layered with the sounds of a crying baby, the sound of feet and wheels crushing gravel, and a variety of exploding shells and gunfire reminiscent of the soundtrack accompanying the film's opening shots of Septimus in the trenches.

Throughout the sequence the volume of the various sounds continues to increase, as does Septimus's already anxious behaviour, thus implying that the soundtrack we are privy to is that which Septimus is experiencing. It is once he returns to face forwards and pronounce to himself: "The whole world is clamouring, kill yourself, kill yourself" that the intradiegetic soundtrack calms. The film visually represents the hallucination as it is experienced by Septimus, whereas previously it had relied on aural signifiers alone. It is interesting that this very hysterical moment is presented using the most normative of techniques such as the use of the classical shot reverse shot sequence to determine Septimus's point of view.

In the novel both Clarissa and Septimus experience the sounds of the car back-firing, but neither sees the other, there is no connection beyond that which O'Connor termed the "intersubjective meditation" of the same object. Gorris's film introduces the relationship between Septimus and Clarissa in its opening scenes, as Clarissa witnesses Septimus's response to the car back-firing in the street through the florist's window. The scene imitates the novel's focus on the trivial as Clarissa is consumed not by the car, or its potentially significant passenger, but by Septimus's face. Clarissa moves closer to the window drawn almost hypnotically to Septimus who stands, looking in, rooted to the spot. It is only when the florist curses the motorcar that Clarissa is snapped out of the all-consuming impression of the unknown man's face. The film introduces a moment where the two characters meet, a moment it then returns to in order to develop the relationship between the pair — this is not an act of transference, but a new scene designed to portray the relationship between the otherwise unconnected characters of Clarissa and Septimus. The film makes changes in its adaptation of the source novel in order to mirror the novel's wholly verbal impressionism. It is apparent that changes do not altogether necessitate a reduction in the relationship between novel and film, rather by making changes to, for example, narrative events, it can develop a stylistic relationship which is far more fruitful and interesting than a simple transference of narrative from one medium to another.

The extradiegetic soundtrack, is highly subjective. Becoming something more than an



accompaniment, it functions as musical impression of the character's emotional turmoil. One may even go so far as to argue that it functions as a non-verbal expression of the hysteria, the music being most obviously subjective during Septimus's hysterical crises. Septimus glances desperately around the room, fiddling with his fingers, his eyes darting here and there as his mouth twitches, his head almost unconsciously nodding as if in agreement with someone. The gestures create the outward appearance of someone in conversation with themselves and are reminiscent of the involuntary spasms and twitches exhibited by Augustine and other famous hysterics. The twitches ease and Septimus, having come to a conclusion as suggested by a short but sharp exhale of breath, starts to look about himself as if in search of something. A sequence of shot-reverse shots follows which convey Septimus's perspective as he first considers a pair of Rezia's scissors, then the gas fire, before settling on an open window. The musical score sheds its multi-layered discord as Septimus glances from one object to another, the various string and woodwind instruments being gradually absented, leaving a solo piano once the window is located and considered. The music is a stylistic imitation of the impressions racing through Septimus's panicked mind, representing the emotional despair of a desperate man, which determines the source of his fear not as death but the situation he finds himself in. Septimus is visibly calmer having seen the window; his face is no longer contorted in fear and desperation, rather it settles into fixed determination as he takes a deep breath before moving purposefully to the window, opening it, and climbing out onto the sill.

At the party, Clarissa is literally silenced by the Bradshaws' announcement of Septimus's death and her face, a picture of horror and confusion, is contrasted with the calm, somewhat smug, veneer presented by Lady Bradshaw. The punctuated manner in which Lady Bradshaw delivers her performance creates the sense that she is striking Clarissa aurally, every word is delivered with a punch that visibly affect Clarissa. This is highlighted with Clarissa's comment, in voice-over, that "she is like a sea-lion. Barking at me". The analogy of the sea-lion, drawn from the novel, presents the image of an animal that sits proudly, barking loudly and proudly at all and sundry, but for who knows what. The film's editing suggests that the focaliser, and therefore the person being bombarded by Sir William's words, is Clarissa: a medium close-up of Clarissa cuts to Lady Bradshaw discussing her husband followed by a cut to Sir William before cutting back to Clarissa, over which we continue to hear Sir William's voice. A disturbed Clarissa, in voice-over, suddenly cries "Stop it. Stop it", but her words do not altogether obliterate Sir William's voice from the soundtrack. The camera cuts back to Bradshaw, who is still deeply engrossed in his own diatribe, zooming in to focus on his eyes: cold, unseeing eyes that impress upon the observer that this is a person who does not actually see the patients he treats, such as the "young man" whose shell-shock and suicide he is discussing. Bradshaw and his sense of proportion, therefore, do not see anything other than yet another person to be converted to his ideal. The film employs voiceover to not only convey Clarissa's distress, but her explicit rejection of Bradshaw and his appropriation of Septimus's hysteria. In voice-over Clarissa presents an alternative story of Bradshaw and his patient: "A young man came to you on the edge of insanity and you forced his soul - made his life intolerable and he killed himself". Voiceover, as a filmic device, presents Clarissa's thoughts and critique of the oppressive social system, thus giving voice to the "unspeakable". There is however one major difference between the beginning of the book and the beginning of the film. The character of Septimus (Rupert Graves) is much more quickly established as a major character within the film. In the book he is introduced as a car backfires and he is



shocked rigid by it although no immediate reason is given why. Over the course of the novel we learn more about his experiences at war and the lasting effect upon him. Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus never meet in the novel, yet we are led to discern they are connected thematically through the mosaic narrative. The Film version of Mrs. Dalloway opens with a brief sequence of Septimus (Rupert Graves) in the trenches of world war one. The shot is thick with smoke and is filmed in slow motion to give the sense of a dream sequence although the title Italy 1918 suggests that this is a flashback. The camera slowly zooms into Septimus face singling him out as the protagonist of this sequence. We see his reaction to a friend being blown up by an explosion and as he sinks into despair the smoke fills the screen fading it to white and softening focus. This soft white backdrop then becomes the drapes in the bedroom of Mrs. Dalloway. These two environments could not be more different; however the transition is not jarring or unsettling; we are taken from the horror trenches into the genteel and elegant world of a Whitehall socialite with the greatest of ease. The transition leaves the viewer with the impression that the two people's lives are somehow connected, but perhaps is not as subtle and gently persuasive as the book.

To conclude, the criterion of faithfulness to content is of least importance. Instead, what matters is faithfulness to the "spirit". What is meant by "spirit" here is that with any work of art there is an underlying sense of what the artist was "getting at" with their work, a certain set of themes or ideas which they were exploring and for which purpose they employed a certain form of artistic representation. And the movie, Mrs. Dalloway does justice to the spirit of the novel. The major concerns of the novel are brought forth through the movie, despite the licence taken by the director to make certain changes. What good film adaptations of novels do is attempt to find analogous techniques to re-present the thematic and formal content of the original work. When one adapts a work from one medium into another, there are absolutely things which are lost, but this does not mean they cannot be regained through other means. Despite Cunningham's assertion that interiority is lost in a film adaptation, through the use of exteriority, or visual and aural aspects, interiority can be invoked without an outright presentation of a character's mind.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M.H and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Handbook of Literary Terms*, 2009.
- Feigel, Lara. *Literature, Cinema and Politics 1930-1945: Reading between the Frames*, 2010.
- Ginesi, Kirsten A. *Virginia Woolf and Cinema: Adaptations of Mrs Dalloway*, 2011.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "On the Art of Adaptation", 2004.
- Murray, Simone. "Materializing Adaptation Theory: The Adaptation Industry", 2008.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Worldview, 2012.
- . "Cinema", 1926. www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-cinema-by-virginia-woolf. Accessed 3 Apr. 2019.