

Film at the Crossroads of Narrative and Dramatic Genre



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Abstract

If film is a form of visual art, why does it rely mainly upon narrative text and is not more indebted to drama? Why are theatrical plays not so easily (and frequently) adapted for the screen as novels and short stories? Is it true, as Käte Hamburger suggests, that “filmed drama becomes epic”? In order to grasp the concept of film hybridism (both film theorists and film makers have long dealt with the natural tendency of film to absorb other art features and forms), in this paper I intend to address the issue of film genre by taking into account Jauss’s evolutionary theory and confronting it with Frye’s concept of “radical of presentation”. André Bazin spoke of the impurity of film, whilst Manoel de Oliveira, who has been said to produce “theatrical films”, clearly states that “film adds to theatre the capacity of fixing the image in time”. Time is, in fact, a decisive factor in genre definition – as Hegel clearly demonstrated – and it is through the way that film deals with this factor that we are able to gauge either its distance from or its closeness to drama and/or to literature.

After several years of research in comparative studies on literature and film a question arose which encouraged me to venture forth along a new path in my investigation, of which this text is the outcome. The issue I am dealing with here is not a closed matter; quite the opposite, this is a theoretical problem with many implications and consequences, and therefore I shall merely try to outline here the main features of my thinking up to this moment, in full awareness that they demand further and more profound investigation.

The whole problem originates from the following: if film is a visual art, why does it rely mainly on narrative text, owing much less to drama, which is a

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“spectacular” genre (like film)? Why are theatrical plays not so easily (and extensively) adapted for the screen as novels and short stories? The discussion of this topic naturally involves the definition of genres. But it is important to clarify that I take this word “genre” here in its original, classical sense, that is, the distinction between epic, lyric and dramatic genre (comedy and tragedy), in as far as these categories have to do with what Wolfgang Kayser calls human “basic attitudes”, “fundamental possibilities of human existence” (Kayser 371) and not, of course, in the sense it later acquired in cinema studies, where genre means a definition of film according to specific types: western, *film noir*, thriller, war movie, etc. – which are categories defined by literary studies as subgenres. The question I want to deal with here is whether film, although it unquestionably manifests dramatic features in its origin and form, is closer to narrative literature than to drama (thus demonstrating epic characteristics), and if this is indeed the case, why.

A possible answer to these questions is rooted in the perception of the nature of narrative itself. Narratology has moved a long way from its structuralist origins to its new direction, to which Monika Fludernik has given a decisive contribution, by emphasising the experiential dimension of narrative:

Narrativity is a function of narrative texts and centres on experientiality of an anthropomorphic nature. This definition divides the traditional area of enquiry (i.e. narratives) along unexpected lines, claiming narrativity for natural narrative [spontaneous oral storytelling] (the term *text* is therefore employed in its structuralist sense) as well as drama and film (*narrative* is therefore a deep structural concept and it is not restricted to prose and epic verse) (Fludernik 26).

Far from being a mere linguistic phenomenon or even a literary strategy, narrative is a cognitive “tool”: it emphasises the perception of temporal flux as evidence of change, through the successive record of events. This record of

sequentiality manifests a specific apprehension of reality, and is therefore a sign of a particular form of *knowledge* (according to its Sanskrit root, *gnā*). In the epigraph to this chapter on narrativity, Fludernik quotes 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 (Fludernik 26).

And so, Fludernik concludes: “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” (Fludernik 27). In his well-known work on time and narrative, *Temps et Récit*, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur underlines the narrative dimension of human experience of temporality, stating that this is precisely the factor which allows the understanding of the literary phenomenon. If human experience of time were not, in some way, pre-narrative we would not be able to understand any form of narrative whatsoever. And he repeatedly explains: “To tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes” (Mitchell 174).

So the first aspect I would like to outline here is the fact that narrative is something other than plot, a phenomenon that has to do with the apprehension of reality, revealing a specific sort of “judgement about the nature of events”. Now we must confront this statement with Hegel’s distinction between the epic and drama, by asking the question: does drama not favour a similar experience? What is the nature of dramatic events as opposed to that of epic/narrative events?

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" (McKeon 222). The relationship between narrative and the world is a central issue, not a secondary one. Narration is useful for the creation of the world, as Wolfgang Kayser would put it (Kayser 390). Of course that drama also aims at a total embodiment of the life process, as Lukács points out; 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." The collision, in accordance with whatever the particular circumstances, characters and aims, should turn out to conform so very much to the aims and characters, as to cancel out its contradiction. The solution must then be like the action itself, at once subjective and objective (Lukács 222).

In a word: *context*, in its specific aspects, is a fundamental dimension of narrative and hopefully a dispensable feature of drama. Narrative aims to create a "possible world", whereas drama aims to involve us in the dramatic nature of this world, in as far as struggle is a condition of existence.

Moreover, there is a particular aspect of this narrative context that determines our apprehension of narrative as being essentially different from that of drama: the fact that it is temporal. Whereas a novel displays a sequence of

events that gives visibility to the experience of temporality, i.e. to change, by placing the fact of transformation before our eyes (in this sense narrative is indeed the visibility of transformation), in a play our attention is mainly concentrated on each scene in itself, and not so much on its sequential, temporal implications. As André Bazin used to say when distinguishing a painting from the image on the screen, it is as if the main force working in narrative text were of a centrifugal nature (with an outward impulse) whereas in drama it is essentially a centripetal action, concentrating everything in the scene itself (Bazin 201).

One of the most brilliant film makers of the 20th century, Andrey Tarkovsky, defines cinema as “time in the form of fact”. His vision about the intrinsic nature of film is a very curious and most pertinent one, since he does not emphasise the spatial aspect of films, but instead concentrates his whole theory on the temporal dimension of the so-called “Seventh Art”. For him, the essence of the director’s work is “to sculpt in time”:

Just as a sculptor takes a lump of marble, and, inwardly conscious of the features of his finished piece, removes everything that is not part of it – so the film-maker, from a ‘lump of time’ made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image. (Tarkovsky 64)

The defence of the intrinsic narrative nature of film lies precisely here: by “printing time in its factual forms and manifestations” (Tarkovsky 63) cinema captures the very essence of temporality – the passage of time, thus rendering *transformation* visible, and with it the possibility of consciousness and knowledge.

On the other hand, through montage film creates a sequential *continuum*, thus manifesting the permanent interaction between each particular action and the world around it (before and after it), between the scene we are watching and

its context, attesting in this way to the importance of Hegel's concept of "totality of objects" for its definition. Film indeed suggests a "possible world", a "world in action", as Flannery O'Connor – a particularly pertinent theorist on the nature and aim of fiction – would put it.¹

So, 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 essential *dramaticity* of events, as Kayser would stress – the truth is that its most profound characteristics have to do with its temporal nature (the temporal nature of perception, which is precisely the nature of film experience) and therefore imply a narrative dimension and organisation. This may seem very obvious, but the urge to avoid a possible subordination of film to literature – or, to use Pasolini's words, to "traditional narrative convention" (Pasolini 148) – has led to a general, imprecise, but well-diffused tendency, in certain *avantgarde milieus* (essentially due to simplistic readings of Gilles Deleuze's theory on cinema), to deny all narrativity to cinema. Those who make a deeper reflection underline one must, at least, accept that the narrative condition of cinema is "circumstantial", as does João Mário Grilo in his pertinent book on "cinema, action, thought", *O Homem Imaginado*: "[A great film] is in no way just the mere invention of a technique or of a new way of representing it, but rather the *emergence of the formal and operative nature of perception* as a circumstantially narrative, but above all absolutely and holistic condition" (Grilo 22; my translation).

Yet, Fludernik's approach, defining narrative as "perceptual activity" that "represents and explains experience", as seen previously, provides the key to this remaining dilemma, by erasing the apparent opposition between narrative (a *certain* concept of narrative, it is important to remember) and experientiality, thus implying that narrativity is much more than merely circumstantial in film. It

is, on the contrary, a defining aspect of its underlying nature, establishing hidden relationships with literary, narrative texts.

It is most interesting to listen to what Käte Hamburger, the German philosopher and literary critic, has to say 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. The novel offers a better basis for cinema than drama... Cinematographic image works as narrative function, it too can 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 161; my translation)

As a matter of fact, a director like Manoel de Oliveira, who is said to produce “theatrical films”, defends the cinema’s independence from drama, from the formal point of view – since theatre is composed of physical, living matter and cinema is its “ghost” –, underlining that film adds to theatre the ability to fix the image in time.² But, he stresses, the result is cinema, not ‘filmed theatre’. The mere 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.

What are the main changing features in this process? First of all, the effect of distance. Due to the mediation of the camera, the film spectator establishes a different relationship with events than a member of a theatre audience. He becomes a real spectator, in the literal sense of the word, as his main function is to see (*speculare*). He is not summoned to “action” (if one can use this

expression) – as he would be in the case of the theatrical experience, which is the space, *par excellence*, of performance, where things are *done* with words, words that can (or should, if we accept the classical postulate) lead to cathartic experience; instead, he *watches* events from a specific point of view, from a distance, adopting the required perspective, a perspective he shares with the film director, which enables him to know and judge what he sees. This is precisely the reason why João Mário Grilo reduces the essential material characteristics of cinema to these two aspects: “the invention of a point of view and of a distance, with all its implications: philosophical, political and, above all, conceptual” (Grilo 18; my translation).

This is also what Oliveira says about his work: that he wishes, above all, to invite spectators *to see* – to see beyond the images themselves, to become conscious of what is really at stake – and hence his liking for long shots and fixed frames, for he considers these slow processes the best way of respecting the freedom of his public, freedom to choose, to take a position – something that many film-makers who employ narrative speed and massive doses of special effects are not concerned with. On the other hand, slowness has a particular, paradoxical capacity of attracting attention to the dramatic importance of the temporal dimension. That is the reason why Jean Leirens says that slow pace is capable of evoking the requirements and the passage of time.³

It is not a coincidence that the perception of filmic temporality is often compared with oneiric experience. Indeed, through mediation, time becomes an imposing force and since the spectator cannot act upon it, he suffers, he is “the victim” of the condition of time, as María Zambrano would put it: “Underneath dreams, underneath time, man does not dispose of himself. He therefore suffers his own reality” (Zambrano 13; my translation). That is why dreams are always experienced with some kind of anxiety, even happy dreams. Zambrano states: “Hence the anxiety which underlies dreams, even happy ones. Because dreams

invite reality” (Zambrano 14; my translation). Suffering time in a condition of impossibility of choice – which is both the case of dreams and the case of the cinematographic experience – is, paradoxically, a powerful means of awakening in us the urge towards reality, the need to *make sense* of time, the absolute necessity of *consciousness* and *meaning*. Considering this complex phenomenon helps us to understand why film is much closer to narrative literature, from the point of view of reception and experience, than it is to drama, which does not favour this kind of oneiric experience, relying mainly upon the imposing power of *presence* (carnal, human presence) as a means of “purifying” actions (since all attention is focused on the nature and mechanism of human struggle) and therefore helping man to regain his intrinsic *freedom* as a human being.

Of course the lack of tri-dimensionality in movies and fiction is also part of the question, having to do with the previously-mentioned *distance* paradigm. In a play, tri-dimensionality creates an appearance of reality (“acting” is “pretending”). Drama is the theatre of life, the (re)presentation of its dramatic essence. Film, on the other hand, is the theatre of life in its significant form, in the form of meaning and knowledge, rendered possible through the causal nexus of temporality. Irena Slawinska, in her work *Le Théâtre dans la pensée contemporaine*, explains very clearly the connection between temporality and meaning – the absence of meaning implies the absence of time and vice-versa, as Hochkeppel’s formula synthetically expresses: “Sinnlosigkeit ist Zeitlosigkeit” (“the loss of meaning is the loss of time”) (Slawinska 211). Cinema wishes to recapture time, to fix it, so that its meaning can be fully grasped – the cinema’s aim is ultimately the fight against death: against the dramatic irreversibility of the passage of time, as Bazin and so many after him have put it – but also, and essentially, against the death of meaning, which is the final victory of death over life.

And so, to conclude, I would like to return to the question of genre as a useful tool to enable one to understand the nature of film in its relationship with drama, with literature and with the way the public responds to it.

Northrop Frye suggests that “the central principle of genre is simple enough. The basis of generic distinctions in literature appears to be the radical of presentation. 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” (Frye 246-247). 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, we are confronted with the complexity of the filmic object: although characters are presented to us “directly”, as in the theatre (and differently from fiction), they are subject to camera mediation, approaching, in this sense, the situation of fiction more than that 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 then 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.

Indeed, if we relate this idea to Hans-Robert Jauss’s theory on the evolution of genres and on their permanent interaction with each other, one must come to the conclusion that the natural historicity of the arts has taken us to the point where cinema seems to exhibit characteristics of a new, hybrid genre. As literary genres are rooted in life and have a social function, literary evolution should also be defined by its function in History and social emancipation, just as the succession of literary systems needs to be studied in its relation with the general historical process (Jauss 97).

The growing importance of cinema in the context of present-day society is proof of the need to consider its function in the sense we are dealing with here: its relation with drama, but above all its close affinity with narrative (and in this sense – but only in this specific aspect – its affinity with literature). To deny film narrativity would be to deny the meaning of time (or, what would be worse, time *as* meaning) – a significant sign of a specific, critical historic moment. Although film can be situated, as Paulo Filipe Monteiro would say, at the transversality between drama and the epic, I believe it is worthwhile to underline the predominance of the temporal aspect, which acts both in the apparently isochronic time of the framed scene and in the sequentiality of montage. The tendency nowadays of some *avant-garde* criticism to deny and refute cinema narrativity would, therefore, seem to be a sign of the present-day difficulty in dealing with meaning itself – clear evidence of today’s critical moment, requiring urgent reflection about the value of temporality. As Zambrano puts it, “Time is a path not just to be followed but a way to acquire knowledge and self-knowledge. Time is the key” – doubtless an epic task.

Notes

¹ Sally Fitzgerald, and Robert Fitzgerald, eds. *Flannery O’Connor. Mystery and Manners. Occasional Prose*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1997: 79.

² Antoine de Baecque, and Jacques Parsi. *Conversas com Manoel de Oliveira*. Porto: Campo das Letras, 1999: 81.

³ Jean Leirens. *Le Cinéma et le Temps*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1954: 110.

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