Journal of Literature and Art Studies, ISSN 2159-5836
February 2014, Vol. 4, No. 2, 118-122

The Importance of Being on Screen: A Comparative Approach to Cinematographic Versions of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde

Maria Isabel dos Santos Sampaio Vieira Barbudo
University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

In contrast with the large number of theatrical performances and filmic versions for television, both British and American, based on the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1975) by Oscar Wilde, there have only been, so far, three films made for the cinema. Although one of them was made in the United States by the American director Kurt Baker in 1992, this paper will address only the two English versions, chronologically separated by a 50-year time span. It will focus on the cinematic adaptations made by English directors Anthony Asquith and Oliver Parker, the former in 1952 and the latter in 2002. Based on the same play, this comparative approach may throw some light on the evolution of cinematographic conditions and techniques as well as relate them to the expectations of audiences in the mid 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century.

Keywords: Wilde, play, adaptation, cinematographic techniques

Introduction

The author will start this paper with the statement that all films, regardless of their genre, are involved in history, for the simple reason that they always reflect the conditions, values, and ideas of the culture that produce them. Under this perspective, they can always be seen as historical documents. In the case of adaptations of literary works, not only do they reflect the work and its period and culture of origin, but also the time and culture of the adaptations. As Stam (2005) argued in his book on *Literature and Film*: "Since adaptations engage the discursive energies of their time, they become a barometer of the ideological trends circulating during the moment of production" (p. 45).

One way of clearly illustrating this notion consists of comparing two cinematographic adaptations of the same literary work, especially when those adaptations are chronologically separated by some decades. This is the case of the two cinematic versions of the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, since the first dated back to 1952 being directed by Anthony Asquith, while the latest was made in 2002 and directed by Oliver Parker.

Based on the same play—a play written and staged in 1985, famous for the satirical portrait of English society up to the end of the 19th century—the two versions reflect the conditions and techniques pertaining to

Maria Isabel dos Santos Sampaio Vieira Barbudo, associate professor, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon.

different phases in the history of British cinema. They are also related to the dissimilar expectations of audiences in the mid-20th century and the early 21st century.

The First Version (Mid-20th Century)

Anthony Asquith, director of the first version, is well known for his contribution to the survival of the British film industry in the post-first war period, especially in the 1930s, when American cinema was advancing towards the hegemonic position that would last up to the present moment. The advent of sound was then offering new challenges to financial stability, and studios like London Films and British International Studios were beginning to train many of the most notable directors, writers, and cameramen of this period. Author of a broad and varied filmography both as a screenplay writer and as a director, Anthony Asquith would, in the 1950s, include in his work the adaptation of plays by British playwrights like Bernard Shaw, Terence Rattigan, and Oscar Wilde. His adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, made in 1952, already in colour, is a good example of the constraints still imposed upon the filming activity in this period, and of the related static conception of a spectacle that may well be classified as "filmed theatre".

This fact is immediately signalled by the first shot of the film, which consists of the curtained stage in a theatre full of spectators dressed in the 19th century costumes. When one of the spectators opens a programme, we may read the title of a play—*The Importance of Being Earnest*—and the name of Oscar Wilde, as well as the first stage-direction on the page. This is followed by the rising of the curtain, so that the scene presenting the characters of John Worthing and his butler gives to the audiences of the film the impression of being about to watch a theatrical performance. Maintaining the same technique, the final shot consists of the fall of the curtain, once again reminding the spectators that they have been watching a play. Theatre within cinema is, therefore, the dialogical structure that characterises this version.

Indeed, Asquith's style of adapting drama for the screen, in a role of "metteur-en-scène" rather than auteur, led some critics like Drazin (1998) to note: "He did not push his own vision, but became an interpreter of other people's material" (p. 45).

Whether we agree or disagree with this opinion, we must certainly acknowledge the strong influence such a theatrical performance has on this film. And that sort of influence is verifiable in several aspects, namely in the maintenance of the interior sceneries in which, according to the stage-directions, most actions of the play take place. The few exceptions added are two brief shots, one of Algernon and the other of Lady Bracknell, who seem to be inside a train, whereas the only exterior settings consists of a street in London and the garden of John Worthing's house in the country.

On the other hand, the use of colour, a novelty introduced after his first films, allows Asquith to suggest certain symbolic meanings, such as the combination of blue and pink in the costumes of Gwendolen and Cecily, as a subtle way of underlining their similarities.

As in a theatrical performance, emphasis is not put on the external actions of the characters but rather on their dialogue, accompanied by their facial expressions, which are predominantly filmed in close-ups and mid-shots. As Tanitch (1999) writes: "Anthony Asquith made no concessions to cinema (…) The film paid homage to both Wilde and Edith Evans, preserving her Lady Bracknell to posterity" (p. 279).

In another comment on the performance of the great theatre actress Edith Evans in the role of Lady

Bracknell, film director Karel Reisz would state:

> Dame Edith demonstrates her utter contempt for those who would love their screen acting different from the theatre, and makes the other actors, with their more refined camera technique, appear a little thin-blooded when they are forced to share the screen with her. (Tanitch, 1999, p. 280)

In spite of its being closer to theatre than to cinema, or simply due to this reason, the fact is that, along with *Pygmalion* (the film directed by Asquith in 1938, still in black and white), this cinematic version of the play by Oscar Wilde has become a classic within British cinema, as is acknowledged in the following review published in *The Times*: "*The Importance of Being Earnest*, without possessing the specific cinematic virtues, sets a standard in style, elegance, and sheer acting genius which will not easily be surpassed" (Tanitch, 1999, p. 280). On the whole, it was certainly less controversial than the latest version, directed by Oliver Parker 50 years later.

The Second Version (Early 21st Century)

Born in London in 1960, Oliver Parker's filmography as a director includes the adaptation of other works by Oscar Wilde, namely *An Ideal Husband* in 1999 and *Dorian Gray* in 2009. His version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, produced in 2002, may be seen as a free adaptation of the play, by adding scenes, images, and settings which are not part of the original play. The predominance of image over word, as a signal of the cultural shifts that have occurred since the mid-20th century, is projected in the way the thoughts and imaginings of some characters, namely Cecily Cardew, are converted into images.

One of the best examples is the visualisation of scenes in which Algernon appears as a medieval knight in armour, and Cecily as a medieval maid being saved by her hero, in romantic sceneries full of old trees and multicoloured flowers, which clearly evoke the atmosphere of some paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The imaginings of Dr. Chasuble in his subconscious attraction for the puritanical Miss Prism are also translated into images which, in this case, consist of drawings and paintings secretly made by Dr. Chasuble himself, depicting the woman of his dreams in provocative poses.

Going even farther in his interpretation of the characters, Oliver Parker, who is also the screenwriter, adds a short flashback in which we may see Lady Bracknell as a young cabaret dancer, thus stressing her very low and very dubious origins. In the final scene of the film, she even adheres to Jack's lie about his real name, which after all is found out to be John and not John Ernest, like in the play or in Asquith's version. Looking at the name John on the page, she bursts out laughing, obviously set on hiding the truth. With the final shot, in which Lady Bracknell, cheerfully laughing, throws away the book with the real name, Oliver Parker is clearly willing to reinforce Wilde's apology of lying, in epigrams like the following one: "The aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure. He is the very basis of civilized society" (Wilde, 1975, p. 992).

As for the features clearly related to the development of technical and cinematographic conditions during the second half of the 20th century, one of the most noticeable is the process of editing the scenes that take place in London, alternating them with others that have the country as their setting, and thereby adopting a grammar and dynamics that are more in line with the cinematic medium. Another aspect is the transference of some scenes and sequences to exterior settings, or to public places, like the night-club in which Jack meets Algernon.

However, the first sequence of the film is perhaps even more significant, owing to the rhythm and suspense created by someone running and being chased in the dark through the streets of London—someone who we later

come to understand to be Algernon, persecuted by creditors. By adding this initial sequence, which is not part of the play, the director immediately catches the attention and curiosity of audiences who have got used to the exciting speed of films of action. As Hutcheon (2006) suggests, when writing about his version, "(…) Movie audiences expect the film to have local colour and to be shot on location, with characters moving through real space" (p. 124).

The expectations of audiences concerning "local colour" may also help explain the spectacular setting chosen by Parker for the "interrogation" scene in which Lady Brackbnell addresses John Worthing as a candidate to Gwendolen's hand. Resembling a huge court of law, with sumptuous staircases in which photographers are strategically hidden in order to take photos of the candidate on trial, this intimidating setting also serves the comicality of the sequence, by being incongruous with a simple marriage proposal.

Besides the sensationalism of this sequence, the film also shows us some characters using means of transport of the epoch, such as Gwendolen posing as a "new woman" by driving a noisy and antique car, Cecily and Algernon gliding in a boat on a bright river, or Algernon unexpectedly landing in a balloon. Based on a reconstitution of the epoch in which the action takes place, these complementary scenes are undoubtedly controversial, especially for those who prefer the classic adaptation, with its absolute faithfulness to the play and the playwright. But the fact is that adaptation, especially in cases like this, must be seen as a transcoding with an intertextual dimension, and using a cinematographic language that tends to discard all the theatrical constraints of the original text.

On the other hand, the strategies to attract audiences to a comedy that might, otherwise, be considered as dated, lead the screenwriter to sometimes overlook historical accuracy, by introducing anachronistic devices. This is the case of the scene in which Gwendolen goes to a tattoo-shop to inscribe the name of her lover on an intimate part of her skin. Even though the first electric machine for tattooing had already been registered in England by the time the play was written, it is not likely that an upper-class girl like Gwendolen would dare go by herself to such a shop. Another example is the scene in which both male protagonists sing and play a ballad dedicated to their girlfriends.

Seemingly conceived to appeal, above all, to the younger generations, who may thus recognise affinities with their own culture in the attitudes of young characters of another epoch, these added scenes are also comic tools that tend to complement the wit and satire of the play text with a more immediate situational comicality. For all these reasons, this filmic version may, on the whole, be considered as typically postmodernist, in the sense of "postmodernism" as described by Harvey (1989), namely when he argues: "Eschewing the idea of progress, postmodernism abandons all sense of historical continuity and memory, while simultaneously developing an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present" (p. 54).

Conclusions

In cinematographic terms, and as Lipovetsky (2010, p. 160) underlines in his work on what he calls the global screen of our days, while traditional films glorified the past in its condition of past, postmodernist films tend to blur the differences between past and present, thus making the past more easily perceptible and more appealing to mass audiences, whose historical accuracy is not necessarily great.

According to these perspectives, we may thus conclude that the film by Oliver Parker is an obvious example

of the concessions made to popular and mass culture of cinema audiences in the early 21st century. In its defence, one could paraphrase something that Orson Wells stated about adapting a novel, and accordingly ask: If one has nothing new to say about a play, why adapt it at all? (Stam, 2005, p. 16). Or using the commentary made by Alain Resnais, one could argue that adapting a literary work without changing it, is like reheating a meal, one notion that Deleuze would express in terms of transformational energies, movements, and intensities.

Finally, one could go back to the title of this paper and suggest that all these controversial issues are just a clear manifestation of the vital "importance of being on screen".

References

Deleuze, G. (2005). *Cinema1*. London, New York: Continuum.
Drazin, C. (1998). *The finest years: British cinema of the 1940's*. London: Andre Deutsch.
Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. New York: Routledge.
Lipovestsky, G., & Serroy, J. (2010). *O Ecrã Global* (*The global screen*) (Trad. L. F. Sarmento). Lisboa: Edições 70.
Stam, R., & Raengo, A. (2005). *Literature and film*. Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
Tanitch, R. (1999). *Oscar Wilde on stage and screen*. London: Methuen.
Wilde, O. (1975). The importance of being earnest. In *The works of Oscar Wilde* (pp. 321-384). London: Collins.