



***The Great Gatsby*: modern product and postmodern adaptation**

Modern art is characterized by experimenting with new forms and expressions that break with the traditional. It is an “artistic art” (Ortega y Gasset, 1948), which moves away from imitation of reality. Artists aim at creating something new and abstract, to the extent of “deforming or shattering reality” (ibid.). Modernism also highlights points of view and individuality, and focuses on a fragmented self, i.e. characters are defined by a gesture, object or part of their body. Moreover, in modernism, there is a “negative influence of the past” (ibid.), since modern artists foreground change, progress and *new* perspectives of seeing the world. However, ironically, in modernist products, a strong presence of intertextuality can also be found, which can be understood as the presence of the past. In contrast, postmodernist art is identified by the presence of metafiction, intertextuality, parody, and a dialogue between the past (the tradition) and the present (what is new). Besides, postmodern creations tend to have unreliable witness narrators, which can make the audience doubt about everything, to the extent of conveying disbelief in fiction itself, since there is no single truth or objectivity. Postmodernism also foregrounds individuality and fragmentation, but in an even more drastic way. According to the aforementioned, it is the purpose of this essay to explore to what extent Baz Luhrmann’s film version of *The Great Gatsby* is a postmodern adaptation and re-appropriation of Fitzgerald’s novel, which is a modernist product.

Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* can be regarded as an example of modernism due to “its refusal to fit comfortably into a literary mold, and its almost elastic ability to lend itself to markedly differing interpretations” (Prigozy, 2006: 343). In this sense, the language used in the novel is experimental: Nick’s state of drunkenness is represented through incomplete sentences and language choices. Moreover, modernism can be said to be present in Nick Carraway and Gatsby’s optimism and change. Nick arrives in New York, buying his first house and seeks social progress and economic growth. Similarly, Gatsby also represents individual progress, by depicting a man who has been able to become rich and build a reputation for himself, despite the fact that not much is known about him and his ancestors. What is more, the fact that “it is through Nick’s eyes that events



unfold" (ibid. 344) demonstrates that the story is not objective or reliable, even if he states "I'm inclined to reserve all judgements" (Fitzgerald, 1925: 1). This is a "key feature of the modern novel's epistemology [in the] sense that truth and meaning vary with point of view" (Matz, 2006: 219). Furthermore, other two features of modernism present in the novel are fragmentation and symbolism. As regards fragmentation, characters in the novel can be said to be portrayed as fragments. For example, Gatsby is his smile, Daisy is her voice, Tom is his muscles. In relation to symbolism, different concepts in the novel are expressed through symbols, such as Gatsby's car, which is a symbol of luxury that ends up being lethal in the end.

Baz Luhrmann's film version of *The Great Gatsby* can be recognized as a postmodern re-appropriation of the novel because of the cinematic elements and techniques present in it, such as metafiction and a dialogue between the past and the present. Metafiction "is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, 1984: 2). Therefore, it can be said that the entire film is an example of metafiction, since Nick, during the first scene, reflecting upon Gatsby's tragic end, is asked by his doctor to write about what has happened back in New York. By doing this, the filmmaker chooses to create a prelude and they achieve to blend present, past, and future. What is more, the prelude also creates intertextuality with the novel itself. Moreover, in the novel, the fact that Nick writes a journal can be understood as an anticipation of the writing of the journal, and then novel, in the postmodern adaptation. Besides, Prigozy mentions that "time is at the center of the novel [as well], as Nick realizes when he advises Gatsby that one can't bring back the past" (2006: 347). However, this can be interpreted as the "rejection" of the past since it "can't be brought back." Furthermore, the music, the cinematic techniques and the characterization also mark the postmodernism in the adaptation. Firstly, as regards the music, throughout the entire film there is a juxtaposition of jazz, which is music from the times of the novel, and hip-hop and pop, which is contemporary music. What is more, the music seems to be connected with the social class: jazz for the high society and hip-hop and pop for the people. Secondly, in connection to the cinematic techniques, the filmmaker decides to use "old" cinematic techniques, such as swish pans, black and



white shots, newspaper clips - montage, slow motion and superimposition. At the same time, they choose to implement typically postmodern or more contemporary cinematic techniques as well, such as dolly zoom, establishing shots, and on-screen text. Once again, both these features can be said to represent the dialogue between the past: old music and techniques; and the present: postmodern music and techniques. For instance, postmodern choices of music and techniques are integrated in the scene in which Nick and Gatsby are in the car. Here, it is possible to hear jazz as extra diegetic music, but also hip-hop as diegetic music. Moreover, many different cinematic techniques are used in the same scene: swish pan in the background, dolly zoom, slow motion and establishing shot. These decisions also help parody the story and the characters.

Thirdly, characterization is completely different in the novel and in the adaptation. In the novel, Gatsby is idealized by Nick, whereas Daisy is demonized. In the film, Gatsby is not idealized. On the contrary, he is demonized and satirized, since he is shown as a luxurious man in an excessive, ridiculous, and self-parodical way, imperfect and even violent. Besides, Daisy is presented as more vulnerable and human than in the novel. This can be clearly considered a characteristic of the postmodern because of the presence of parody.

All in all, it can be argued that the novel *The Great Gatsby* is a modern product, whereas the film version is a postmodern one. On the one hand, Fitzgerald chooses to narrate the novel from a witness point of view, which gives unreliability to the story. Besides, he resorts to symbols and experimental language in order to move away from the tradition. Also, he portrays characters as fragments, to the extent that we recognize them just by a gesture or characteristic of their bodies. On the other hand, Baz Luhrmann resorts to parody and metafiction, creating a frame to the story with the prelude. Besides, he decides to have contemporary and "old" music and cinematic techniques at the same time, not only blurring the boundaries between the past and the present, but also between the high class culture and that of the masses.

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An approach to teaching *Pride and Prejudice* (the novel and the film)

The following activity is aimed to be carried out at a Bilingual Secondary School or at Lenguas Vivas Secondary School where young adults between 16 and 18 years old with at least an Upper-Intermediate level of English can work thoroughly on literary texts and films.

- Analyze the scene of the ball at Netherfield Hall in *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel by Jane Austen (Chapter 18, from its beginning "Till Elizabeth entered the drawing room at Netherfield..." until "They had not long separated when Miss Bingley came towards her") and compare it with the version of the same scene in Joe Wright's homonymous film (from min. 35 to min. 41.50). Reflect upon the literary techniques in the novel and the film techniques in the movie that allow the author and the filmmaker to create meaning.

The ball at Netherfield Hall is very much expected by the Bennet girls. Elizabeth in particular wants Mr. Wickham to be there, but she cannot find him. She soon learns that he is not attending and then reluctantly, she dances with Mr. Collins. After these first two dances, she finds herself agreeing to dance with Mr. Darcy, whom she hates at the time.

Dancing is important both to courtship and to the structure of the novel. In the restricted social conventions of England at the turn of the 19th century, dancing was one of the few ways young men and women could talk privately and test their mutual chemistry. Moreover, the Netherfield ball is at the very end of Volume I, where a climax is reached between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy.

In regards to the form of the fragment proposed, there is a prominence of direct speech on the part of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy; they exchange ideas throughout their dance and their words are reproduced between inverted commas. Nevertheless, Jane Austen



resorts to other writing devices, such as the summary of events through a narrator from the point of view of one of the characters and free indirect speech (used to resemble their voice). The latter is sometimes introduced by the use of a dash that alerts the reader and such is the case of the following example in which Elizabeth's deep thoughts are revealed: "—Attention, forbearance, patience with Darcy, was injury to Wickham." She convinces herself that she must not be kind to Mr. Darcy because he has harmed Wickham. The use of the semicolon in the novel is very frequent too. It states a parallelism not only in form but also in content. It joins two ideas into a greater one, creating balance in discourse. In this comedy of manners, decorum seems to be at its highest and it is shown even through the use of punctuation marks.

In Joe Wright's version of this scene, there are several cinematographic devices than transpose the techniques in the novel. The filmmaker uses the art of montage in order to show its setting at Netherfield, from the moment the guests arrive to the moment they dance, progressively turning it from a social event to a more intimate one, between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy.

A long take begins with the camera focused on Elizabeth and it spins 360° twice around her. Then, it follows her eye level from the front, showing her head and shoulders. The same frame shows Mr. Darcy tracking her from behind in the background and then disappearing, showing his incipient interest in her. She enters the ballroom and the camera zooms out a little and moves along with her showing also her hips, the musicians and other guests in the room. The camera stops when she encounters Charlotte and Elizabeth asks her about Mr. Wickham. After a short exchange, the camera moves along following them from behind into the other room, where they find Jane, who confirms to



Elizabeth that Wickham is not there and will not be. Mr. Collins enters the frame and asks Elizabeth to dance with him.

In this adaptation of the literary text, the filmmaker chooses to expand on their dancing, whose summary is only 6-line long in the novel.

“The first two dances, however, brought a return of distress; they were dances of mortification. Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologizing instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was ecstasy.” (101)

We consider there is an intention behind this choice, which is to show a contrast between Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy as a dancing partner (and their suitability as a husband). With the former she barely makes eye contact while dancing. Also, she does not follow Mr. Collins in his conversation because she is actually engaged in a conversation with Jane. Moreover, she seems to feel awkward when he approaches her and she even avoids him.

When Elizabeth leaves the ballroom laughing with Charlotte, the camera follows them and stops abruptly on a close up to Mr. Darcy's chest. Then it dollies out, revealing all of his figure, his height and his status in comparison to Elizabeth's. Both of them are framed facing each other while he asks her to dance and she agrees.

While they dance, the camera follows the 180° rule in a close shot to their head and shoulders. They both engage in conversation and make eye contact. The camera focuses on each of them when they say a line and on both of them when they meet at the centre.

When he tells her “I hope to afford you more clarity in the future” in regards to her being puzzled about his character there is a zoom in shot of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth and other guests are shown in the background. The camera turns 360° showing that the rest of the society has disappeared. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth dance alone, keeping the 180° rule



again. The camera focuses alternately on both of them and moves as if handheld while they break the axis, creating even more tension in their intimacy.

While they are dancing, the music changes suddenly, there is a juxtaposition of diegetic music (the one they dance to) and extradiegetic music (the music that adds tension and shows their emotions, contrary to what their words show) (Chandler: 169). This way, the emphasis is not only given to the visual code, but also to acoustics. It provides the audience with a more meaningful audiovisual experience by which to understand the feelings of the characters in the film. Through these devices, the emotions are enhanced in the movie, whereas in the novel the focus is more on the characters' rationality.

Lastly, the script is a very important element to create tension in this scene. Some of the direct speech lines in the novel have been selected to reproduce the voices of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth in the film too. Anyway, most of it was adapted and then a lot has been added to establish a different tone for the film: a more emotional and a more romantic product.

Rationale

The activity that was developed above aims at a much more technical knowledge than what I would target in the English classroom. I would rather focus more on the stories that link both the Literature classic and the movie, taking a more thematic approach instead of a formalist one, that is to say, not so much on the form but on the meaning these stories convey (Jennings: 1996).

New generations have more access to multimedia than ever before. To take advantage of that in the English classroom is always a good idea, as it can have a positive impact in the students' engagement and, ultimately, in their appropriation of the English



language. Students can bring into the classroom other works of art of the same theme to broaden the links collaboratively. As Jennings mentions: “the theme-linking of concepts common to works of literature and films available on video for classroom exploitation has a likely pay-off in encouraging students to bridge the gap between ‘classic’ and popular culture”.

Indeed, film adaptations are usually transposed taking into account the new audiences and they help to narrow down the gap between the context of production of the novel and the new context of reception (Hutcheon, 2006). In the case of Joe Wright’s adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is not fidelity with the novel that matters the most, but the value that is added by the filmmaker when making specific choices and taking into account the new audience. I would definitely introduce some decoding strategies of this transposition in the classrooms so students can become more media literate. Helping students raise their awareness about how meaning is constructed can help enhance their enjoyment of the story without breaking the spell or making them detached viewers.

Finally, I believe it is important to be able to recognize different modes of engagement in their specificity. The telling mode (novels, short stories) proposes a very different engagement from the showing mode (films, series), they both provide us with a very unique experience of understanding meaning and relating to stories (Hutcheon: 22-25). None of them is better or worse. Making students appreciate a wide range of art forms and making them consume stories in different ways definitely enriches the learning process.

SOURCES

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