

Recycling the Past. Women on Screen

Prof. univ. dr. Michaela Praisler
“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati

Résumé: *Au long des années, les constructions sociales féminines ont constitué le sujet favori des romanciers et des producteurs de films. Les uns les ont reflétées, les autres les ont narrées de manière réfractaire, mais ils ont tous ajouté une critique plus ou moins nette de la femme en tant que sous-culture de l'entier patriarcal. D'un roman à l'autre et du livre au grand écran, les images de la féminité se sont constamment métamorphosées, aspect que ce travail se propose de dévoiler. Les cas soumis à l'analyse sont ceux qui sont présentés dans Orgueil et préjugés, remanié dans Le Journal de Bridget Jones, et Madame Dalloway, repris dans Les Heures. Sapant la stabilité du canon, dont la centralité a imposé une nouvelle zone marginale aux femmes, les stratégies exhibées dans le texte et le film expriment de la colère et invitent à considérer la politique qui domine sa composante stylistique.*

Mots-clés: *femmes, représentation, intertexte, roman, film*

1. Opening lines

Despite the fact that they usually go under the label of fiction, of unreality therefore, literary and filmic discourses are primarily social practices with a political component, which both reconstruct and influence the reality of societal systems. The way in which they are produced and reproduced depends on the characteristic elements of any societal system, namely the attitudes, values, mental representations, ideologies, education, cultural and historical background that define the structure of human organisations.

The construction of women in these types of discourse, along the lines of roles, images and models, may thus be seen as a response to specific social imperatives. Under patriarchy, this becomes a political process in essence, one which allows representation to be “naturalised and ultimately coercive in structuring women’s self-representation”. [1]

In other words, the way in which women have been socially constructed has then been taken up by the canonical (ergo male) literary text which, in turn, has left imprints on the understanding of womanhood. Nevertheless, the male produced literature has increasingly been counteracted by women’s writing (and only exceptionally by that of men), which offers a fresher perspective and parodies the outmoded formulations of femininity from traditionally masculine standpoints. Furthermore, besides the changes brought about by the gender shift and by diachrony, additional changes have been allowed by the intermedial genre crossing, in particular from the page to the screen.

2. Case studies

Under focus here are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours* – novel and filmic texts functioning as cultural intertexts. In one way or another, they all recycle the past and bring women to the foreground of contemporary discussion, but their consideration in pairs seems more appropriate in view of outlining immediate interconnections and older traces visible on the present day palimpsest.

2.1. *Pride and Prejudice* vs *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

Jane Austen’s novel of 1813, *Pride and Prejudice*, centred round Elizabeth Bennet, discusses the importance of family and environment with reference to a young woman’s character and evolution. In spite of her wisdom and her wit, the twenty year old protagonist is crippled by her social status and by a prejudice which is not necessarily hers, but borrowed from the wider context of the time. Being governed by the principle of having young ladies of modest condition marry (preferably well) in order to have a position or, better still, to mount the social hierarchical stair, Elizabeth’s world revolves around machinations targeting

possible liaisons. The plot building difficulties are a result of the fact that love is sought, as a cure for the illness of being trapped inside this network. If women are expected to marry as they 'should', finding someone to love (not necessarily to be loved by) is the minimum condition they pose. Elizabeth's quests involve others, however; she always seems to come second. Her Darcy is initially no more than a challenge, which she engages in via intellectual meditation and debate. Expectedly, as long as her dominating principle is reason (male, by definition), she is incapable of love. It is only when she allows her heart (the female ingredient) to make the decisions that she manages to form a couple with the notorious Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Bridget Jones, the Elizabeth Bennet of Helen Fielding's novel (1996) is, like the latter, single and in search of a male partner. Thirty something years of age, with a career and a life of her own, Bridget is still very much under the influence of her parents who, for the sake of their own friends and acquaintances, want to marry their daughter off respectably. Not necessarily wanting to get married and rejecting her parents' intrusion, she desperately tries however to procure a boyfriend. Initially infatuated with her boss, Daniel Cleaver, and dismissing her parents' choice, Mark Darcy, she ends up being cheated on by the former and falling madly in love with the latter. The twentieth century version of the early Victorian Austenian character, Bridget Jones, is unhappy with her freedom and emancipation, on the one hand because her private life is bland, and on the other because prejudice still works against single women with a will and a way. Moreover, she is crushed under the burden of the dictates of contemporary culture, as promoted by glossy women's magazines. Portraying the bitter reality of women in society in a comic mode actually serves to rewrite the literary past as well. What remains a constant is the oblique criticism formulated against suffocating structures of authority imposing secondariness on women and silencing their attempts at rebellion, the diary form of the novel chosen being significantly used to this end.

The film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and of *Bridget Jones's Diary* create even more memorable characters than do their novel sources. Keira Knightley (as Elizabeth) and Renee Zellweger (as Bridget) act out their parts convincingly, addressing the contemporary viewer as much as the problematics under the lens. As compared to Elizabeth's progress (accepted and acceptable because associated with the past), Bridget's is at once recognisable and reprimandable because of the inertia involved and the past's contamination of the present. The Elizabeth-Bridget metamorphosis is justified by broader world views, but also by the obvious, financially-determined shift in gender roles:

HF: Austen did say the only thing that renders a single woman pitiable is poverty, in *Emma*, I think. Now it's no longer necessary to be married in order to be well off. I think it has to do with others' perceptions. People who feel sorry for single women tend to feel less so if the women are wealthy, but of course that doesn't mean the women are happier. I just think it's a good idea not to be bigoted. (*An interview with Helen Fielding by Ashton Applewhite*) [2]

Few instructions on decoding the present day representation of womanhood embodied by Bridget are needed, or given for that matter. Despite the fact that it is customary for the official DVDs to offer explanatory notes and additional information which contextualise the productions, reflect their making and, more importantly, illustrate the literary heritage supporting the films, the DVD with *Bridget Jones's Diary* only contains 'An Audio Commentary with Marleen Gorris' and 'An Interactive Quiz', "Who's Your Ideal Man – Mark or Daniel?". Interaction rather than instruction seems to hold first place, otherwise symptomatic for the contemporary scene and its cultural game.

In the case of the DVD with *Pride and Prejudice*, it also includes the following chapters: 'The Politics of Dating', 'The Stately Homes of *Pride and Prejudice*', 'The Bennets', 'The Life and Times of Jane Austen', 'On Set Diaries', 'Audio Commentary with

Director Joe Wright', 'Galleries of the 19th Century', 'Pride and Prejudice Family Tree', 'Alternate US Ending'. This time, guidelines are given to support viewers in their interpretative enterprises and to draw the outlines of society in nineteenth century England, while simultaneously formulating excuses for the artistic reproduction of previous modes and manners.

2.2. Mrs Dalloway vs The Hours

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* foregrounds Clarissa, the middle-aged, upper middle class woman struggling to cope with post war twentieth century trauma and nineteenth century patterns of thought. Practically embodying Everywoman, Clarissa muses upon her condition while carrying on with the nothingness of daily routine. Married but not in love, socialising but alone, she uses men as mirrors to reconsider her past and glimpse at her future. Her husband, Richard, is probably the most opaque, due to his only being drawn in terms of a parliamentary seat and a conventional demeanour. A former love, Peter Walsh, on the other hand, is the mirror she sees herself as young and pulsating with life in. As for Septimus Warren-Smith, the young man she barely crosses paths with, he is the perfect looking glass for a Clarissa that is as troubled deep down as he. The conveyor belt of the protagonist's life pictures women as aesthetic and domestic, thus emphasising yet another feminine myth. Nevertheless, the novel's mute ridicule, its silent anger, its intertextual references and its metafictional implications obliquely underline the exact opposite of the overt statements made. This subtle dialogism, together with the symbolical open endedness of the book rounds up the portraiture of Woman intended, connoting in the direction of complexity, multifaceted personality, wealth of imagination and profundity of reasoning powers.

From the London of the early forties, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* takes the reader to the New York of the early twenty first century, in the life and adventures of a replica of the Woolfian character. This Clarissa is the independent, liberal minded book editor with a family of three (women). Her friend Richard (the poet) is built on Septimus, and her old friend, Louis, on Peter. All three rewrite Woolf's biography, from the experimental and misunderstood artistic to the unbalanced and homosexual personal. The shift from the woman as novelist (Virginia Woolf) to the woman as reader (Laura Brown) and to the woman as character realising fiction in a way (Clarissa Vaughan) is clearly emphasised, *The Hours* thus reading as a fictionalised version of an otherwise quite real literary credo. Its three narrative levels bring to attention three stereotypes and their transmission, highlighting three extraordinary women, who dread the quotidian and the banal, refusing to conform to pre-established moulds or be part of the mainstream. Virginia chooses death (as the preferred alternative to the benefits of civil married life in the absence of children), Laura chooses life (which she equates with abandoning her husband and two children, together with their perfectly ordinary existence), while Clarissa balances the two and adopts her own mix, paying the price of marginalisation for her otherness.

Interviewed in 1998, just before the publishing of his novel, Michael Cunningham declares his passion for Virginia Woolf and everything she stands for, stressing its underlying core:

LH: I think it's brave and wonderful that you're writing a book about three women. It's daring.

MC: Well, I do it with some slightly strange combination of... a sort of brio and real nervousness. [...] The farther afield you move from your own experience, the greater the chances that what you write will be fraudulent, will just be... fake, and wrong. [But] I feel like I get these women; I feel like I am them.

LH: So when this book comes out, what do you hope people will get out of it? What do you think its... essence is?

MC: It's a book about human beings, and it's also a book about a book. (*An Interview with Michael Cunningham by Lorri Holt*) [3]

With regard to the novel's transition to the screen, Cunningham remarks:

MC: I knew, of course, that the novel was going to have to lose weight in its transition to screen. There's nothing that's been cut that I think was a mistake to cut. (*An Interview with Michael Cunningham by Rob Blackwelder*) [4]

The actresses chosen to play the part of young and old Clarissa Dalloway in the film adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway* are Natascha McElhone and Vanessa Redgrave, who perform impeccably and, being role models themselves, construct newer, impressive images of globally recognisable cultural heroines. As for the main cast of *The Hours*, it includes famous names like Nicole Kidman (as Virginia Woolf), Julianne Moore (as Laura Brown) and Meryl Streep (as Clarissa Vaughan) – strategically selected in view of bringing to life and of closely scrutinising different hypostases of femininity.

The DVD with *Mrs. Dalloway* offers more space to the details regarding the women involved in the production of the novel/film than any before, also including the following chapters: 'Play Trailer', 'Play Making of Featurette', 'Production Notes', 'About Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway', 'Director Marleen Gorris Biography', 'Screenwriter Eileen Atkins Biography', 'Vanessa Redgrave Biography', 'Natascha McElhone Biography' and 'Rupert Graves Biography'.

The DVD supporting *The Hours* comes with its own set of supplementary material: 'The Music of The Hours', 'Three Women', 'Filmmakers Introduction', 'The Mind and Times of Virginia Woolf', 'The Lives of Mrs. Dalloway', 'Theatrical Trailer', 'Storyboards', 'Audio Commentary with the Director and Screenwriter', 'Audio Commentary with the Cast'. As may be observed, again the predilection is for instructions on how to read the past and understand its recycling, with special reference to mind frames and reconstructions of womanhood.

3. Concluding lines

Leaving traces that determine the cartography of present day culture, myth making / myth breaking novel and filmic texts like the ones under focus allow looking into the whys and hows of the social constructions of women and the latter's attempts at deconstructing them. Trespassing temporal boundaries and crossing genres, images are imported and exported, undergoing a process of change. Women, on the other hand, continue to go through similar experiences and thus provide a constant reference point. Turned into fictional characters and then re-identified in the world that is, women are "made", which only suggests that they may be "unmade" or "made differently", avoiding social and cultural determinism and locating "the liberatory space for resistance". [5] Reading *Pride and Prejudice*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Hours* in this key unveils not only the endless chain of artistic (re)production, but also the politics of stereotyping and its influencing strategies.

Notes

[1] Rajan, R. S. (1996). *Real and Imagined Women*. London and New York: Routledge (p. 129)

[2] see http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/236/Helen-Fielding

[3] see <http://www.pifmagazine.com/1998/12/michael-cunningham/>

[4] see <http://splicedwire.com/02features/cunninghamhare.html>

[5] in Rajan, R. S. (1996). *Real and Imagined Women*. London and New York: Routledge (p. 130)

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Filmography

Bridget Jones's Diary (2001), Dir. Sharon Maguire, UK – DVD 823 106 4 11

Mrs. Dalloway (1997), Dir. Marleen Gorris, UK – DVD ART 157

Pride and Prejudice (2005), Dir. Joe Wright, UK – DVD 823 912 5 11

The Hours (2002), Dir. Stephen Daldry, USA – DVD D888844