

**TIME SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY IN FILM VERSIONS OF  
ENGLISH NOVELS AND CONTEMPORARY SONG LYRICS***Ecaterina ALBU, Alexandra SUDNIȚÎNA**Catedra Filologie Engleză*

Polivalența semantică și culturală a unităților limbajului constituie pilonul interpretării mesajului redat în mod verbal și audiovizual. Trebuie subliniat faptul că decodarea semnificațiilor ascunse ale operei de artă clasice sau contemporane este strâns legată cu puterea discursivă și valoarea stilistică a limbajului acesteia și prezintă o modalitate eficientă de a reda o multitudine de simboluri în romanul contemporan englez sau în textele și clipurile video ale pieselor muzicale contemporane.

Este incontestabil faptul că posibilitatea decodării simbolului filosofic și a celui literar prin diferite mijloace lingvistice contribuie la identificarea funcționalității textului și a mesajului comunicativ în procesul adaptării lui televizate și cinematografice. În prezentul articol intenționăm să analizăm simboluri esențiale redade în ecranizarea literaturii clasice și contemporane engleze sau în textele și în clipurile video ale pieselor muzicale contemporane prin intermediul mijloacelor verbale și audiovizuale. Este întreprinsă o analiză comparativă a transformărilor structurale, contextuale și stilistice ale simbolurilor romanului clasic în versiunea lui cinematografică, precum interpretarea lingvo-stilistică și semantică a redării simbolismului în texte de cântece contemporane însoțite de clipuri video.

One of the undeniable merits of any verbal message is its potential of rendering a multiplicity of symbolic meanings which are intrinsically embedded in the language as a social practice and a cultural phenomenon. The human aptitude of employing language means to engage in a significant interaction reflects the capacity to convey messages using a broad variety of media in which the contemporary society abounds. Most linguistic transformations that a verbal message, either worded or written, inevitably undergoes are basically explained by the requirements that any medium of conveying information stipulates. Nowadays audio-visual and verbal media acquire increasing significance and exert escalating influence upon both the private and the public realms of using language as a message-defining and image-building tool.

The potential of enhancing textual messages with the accent placed on their perceptivity has long been recognized as the essential merit of such mass media sources as television and cinema, both the media being inextricably bound. Therefore the necessity arises to reveal a variety of linguistic and stylistic methods helping to represent and develop symbolic meanings and images via verbal and audio-visual channels.

However, the essential problematics of the contemporary media sources and art forms conveying symbols, building imagery and thereby expressing verbal messages in a variety of shapes resides in their vulnerability to overt criticism on the part of the canonic art form adherents, such as literary analysts, critics and specialists in the area of language studies or textual semiotics. The newly emerging media are likely to become a target for rejection and denial whenever it comes to recognizing these as separate art forms which frame textual messages bearing symbolic meanings and expressing particular or generally acknowledged ideas.

One of suchlike art forms which has enjoyed a long history of evolution and undergone painstaking development stages, setting specific standards of language and acting performance, is that of film and cinematic adaptation, a copious and versatile product and form of artistic expression involving a multitude of aspects from which a specific phenomenon is represented and framed linguistically, audio-visually and symbolically. The film adaptation, apart from cinema in general, is one of the alleged targets oftentimes blamed for its radical reshaping of the original source, i.e. the work of literature, up to distorting its ideas, changing or skipping facts or events presented in the work of literature and thus proving its inferiority to the latter. This is the opinion, which, in accordance with B. Shepherd, is linked to the issue of fidelity to the essentially verbal matter which is adapted and hence reshaped to a greater or lesser extent [1]. Most obvious changes striking the eye of those perceiving the final product are the curtailment of the text and the necessity of the language medium to share the niche with the audio-visual and other channels of conveying messages and ideas.

Yet the status of other media products, such as films or music videos, in accordance with the view expressed by P.Persson, is equal to that of literature when considered from the standpoint of contemporary narratology, which studies all types of narratives and fictional words defined by either writers or filmmakers

and placed on the same hierarchic contemporary art level [2]. It would thus be reasonable to conclude that for the purpose of the analysis one can admit the narratologic equality of both music video narrative as a form or product of popular culture and literature as a classical verbal realm of expression.

Moreover, the essence and tasks of literature as a form of linguistic rendition and a mode of conveying human thought in words, as S.Olsen affirms, are as wide and polyvalent as those referred to the notion of the narrative. The author considers it common practice for literature to be regarded not only as a verbal medium, but as a sociological institution as well, which in its broader sense encompasses human cooperation in a series of verbal and other practices including writing, publishing, editing, and which is more, presentation or performance, the practice which transcends the boundaries of diegesis and inevitably turn to mimesis [3]. Apparently, cinematic adaptation and video clips as the media incorporating verbal messages or converting written texts can be treated as one of the final stages of literary output, a mediated consequence and a miscellaneous projection of the artistic message expressed by a multiplicity of means.

Naturally, one of the functional properties of a work of literature is its potential for generating imagery, be it trite or vanguard, with the image itself defined by M.Abrams as the element of mental pictures reflected in readers' minds and viewed as part and parcel of literary works perceived in totality [4]. By extension, image, as one of the media products can also emerge as a relevant constituent of the audio-visual and verbal whole, its importance escalating in unison with the impact of the channel and the form of conveying the message.

The notion of the image is tightly bound with that of the symbol, with the two notions confused and frequently perceived as neighboring in modern literary theory and cultural studies. Symbolism, as M.Fludernik insists, implies the use of symbols which purport to convey specific ideas and stand for something other than what they literally represent in a work of art, or, as has been established above, in a medium conveying verbal messages by a variety of means [5]. Any image in a literary or audio-visual medium is formed unequivocally, being either literal, i.e. direct or figurative, implicit and encoded. Its presence is in most cases undeniable in a work of literature, accepted as a form of discourse or a music video, perceived as its smaller form, i.e. a text with the semantically and stylistically charged lyrics present [6]. The issue of the connection established between the audio-visual and verbal spheres meant to expose specific miscellaneous imagery relates to stylistic consistency in making use of the language means, which, once incorporated into one of the contemporary television or cinematic art forms, is likely to embed particular socio-cultural and literary symbolism. The presence of symbols in either film or television is an arguable point in itself, since it is eventually decoded by the viewer, with the same situation observed in literature, wherein the narratee perceives a literal or figurative image as either symbolic or indicative of a concept or a category.

A closer look at most literary works adapted for the screen often reveals an increasing propensity towards toying with the categorical concept of time in its philosophic, semantic and generic understanding. Time as a line of progression towards the future events is exposed in any literary work through plotlines, which enhance the alleged image by representing it as told by an overt narrative agency, observed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "Curious Case of Benjamin Button", with the example considered below:

*"As long ago as 1860 it was the proper thing to be born at home. At present, so I am told, the high gods of medicine have decreed that the first cries of the young shall be uttered (1) upon the anaesthetic air of a hospital, preferably a fashionable one. So young Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were fifty years ahead of style when they decided, one day in the summer of 1860, that their first baby should be born in a hospital. Whether this anachronism had any bearing upon the astonishing history I am about to set down will never be known. I shall tell you what occurred, and let you judge for yourself" [7].*

The introductory paragraph gains narratological expressivity owing to the tellability of the story in general, the effect provided, no doubt, by the overt narrator, addressing the reader in a straightforward and mildly ironic manner ('the high gods of medicine have decreed') enhanced phonetically ('anaesthetic', 'anachronism', 'any', 'astonishing'). In addition, the chronological structuring of the exposition in the passage infuses the story with a disrupted flashback ('as long as 1860 it was the proper thing...', 'at present, so I am told, ...', 'so young Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were...') that immediately creates the implicit time imagery sustained by the direct identification of the analeptic 'anachronism'. The symbolic identification of time is also present: it is the hospital, the token of modernity and birth by the narrator's book, and the proof of the Buttons' novel decision of welcoming the heir in so 'unusual' a place. Consequently, whereas the time imagery is indicated in the literary text narratologically through the disrupted flashback and sustained by alliterative patterns demonstrated, the literary symbol of time as a philosophical category is implicit in the hospital ward proper.

The adaptation of the alleged story features considerable plot modifications and is far more intricate than the original chronologically, representing a highly complex cinematic narrative. Yet the essential structuring remains the same, as it becomes obvious from the example given:

*“As all things do, it begins in the dark...”*

*A woman’s (v. o.): What are you looking at?*

*Caroline: The wind, Mother... They say a hurricane is on its way... You’ve been asleep... I was waiting to see you...*

**Int., hospital room, New Orleans - morning, present**

*Now we see we’re in a hospital room with layers of white enamel paint trying without success to hide the years... An old woman past 80, withered, still regal with a green turban around her bald head is propped by pillows, her blue eyes looking out at us from her bed... She’s connected to an intravenous for sustenance and a morphine drip... Her name is DAISY FULLER. She speaks with a Southern lilt.*

*Daisy: If it wasn’t for hurricanes we wouldn’t have a hurricane season.*

*Caroline: I’ve forgotten what the weather can be like here. I’ve lived with four seasons so many years now...” [8]*

Compared to its literary counterpart, the cinematic adaptation of the story by E.Roth, a highly acclaimed Hollywood scriptwriter, also begins with the present-time setting implicitly lapsing into the old woman’s reminiscences of the years passed, yet the visual image of the character is distantly indicative of time as a symbol. Visually the archetypal figure of a mother is delineated by the enumeration and a detachment (*‘An old woman past 80, withered, still regal with a green turban around her bald head is propped by pillows, her blue eyes looking out at us from her bed’*), and the image of old age is thus built. The syntactically incomplete one-member sentence preceding the figures, however, is also vaguely indicative of time (*‘The wind, Mother’*), with the central element of the setting, i.e. the hospital ward, reiterating the original source. No flashback can be found in the script, yet the old woman’s willingness to take a trip down the memory lane is also rendered in quite a disrupted manner, which is natural under the circumstances (*‘I’ve forgotten what the weather can be like here. I’ve lived with four seasons so many years now.’*).

The fragment in the scenario also features the characters alien to the story proper: both Daisy and Caroline are fictitious with reference to the original, which makes their emergence all the more indicative of the time span separating the present in the hospital ward from the past where the original story with the birth of Benjamin Button at its core will probably unravel. Thus, the imagery related to time and ageing, by analogy with the story itself, is indicated in the script using structural stylistic devices, with the disrupted chronology only implied by the visual image of the character, whereas the symbolic meaning of the hospital ward is transported from the literary narrative into the adapted one, aptly preserving the expository element of the plot.

This having been mentioned, a music video containing unique parallelism to Fitzgerald’s story should be put in the spotlight of analysis. This is the case of “Natural Blues” [9], a song/music video by the American DJ, singer, songwriter and musician Richard Melville Hall, also known as Moby [10]. The music video is a short story of an old man living in an asylum surrounded by other elders, who relives memories of his youth while turning the pages of an old photo album and sees the deeds of his youth somehow projected on the hospital TV screen. A young woman, whose image is apparently a blend of a seraphic image and of a hospital nurse, appears in front of him and beckons him to herself, slowly dragging him away down the corridor. By the end of the video story the protagonist is transformed into a baby, and raised high in the air by the angelic young woman.

The symbol of time – the hospital ward – in the video is an absolute parallel to the one in the “Curious Case of Benjamin Button”, supported by similar imagery of elders surrounding the protagonists in both narratives and the hospital nurse becoming an angel of mercy. The static nature of the protagonist’s life in the asylum for the elderly in “Natural Blues” is later disrupted by the unexpected, yet logical emergence of the angel of mercy that transforms drastically and dynamically the stale existence of the protagonist and takes him back in time transforming him into a baby. Thus, the time reversal as a general time process in both stories is the major common point that draws an unbreakable parallel between them and makes the plots of both stories converge.

When speaking about the linguistic aspect of the song illustrating the category of time, one should mention the overall pattern of the chorus of the song, which represents a lament of an old man that symbolizes the

inevitability of aging (*Oh Lordy, trouble so hard/ Don't nobody knows my troubles but God*), that is repeated over and over again, being the dominant line in the entire song and repeated about eighteen times. Moreover, the stylistic inversion and double negation and an intentional grammatical inconsistency (*Don't nobody knows*) highlight once more the almost infinitely repeated lament.

The lines of the first stanza bring up and make a direct reference to the categorial concept of time:

*“went down the hill, the other day  
my soul got happy and stayed all day”*

The progression and development in time are first pointed out by the verb *went down*, and then by the noun phrase *the other day*, finally reinforced by a finiteness and finality in the verb *stayed* and adverbial modifier *all day*.

The lines of the second stanza create a different image.

*“went in the room, didn't stay long,  
looked on the bed, and brother was dead”*

The temporal progression is modified. The verb *went* brings it up again, but ends in a change of action – *didn't stay long*. And now the conclusion – *looked on the bed, brother was dead* – the symbol of the inevitability is embedded in the categorial concept of time.

Hence the concepts of symbolism and imagery, being tightly bound with the stylistic tropes in both literature as a verbal medium and television, as well as cinematic adaptations, merit particular attention on the part of the literary analyst and film specialist to an equal degree. The potential of the phonetic and lexical language tropes to unveil literary imagery of such philosophically bound concept as time often correlates with the symbolic value of the setting indicative of the corresponding symbol. The film adaptation of a literary piece appears capable of retaining the alleged imagery with special emphasis laid on the use of structural stylistic devices. Also, owing to the aptitude and accuracy of the adapter, it is capable of retaining and translating the symbol of time into the film setting with the equal measure of exactitude, incorporating new literary figures that enhance the perceptivity of both the image and the symbol related to it in the cinematographic version.

#### References:

1. Shepherd B. *Adaptation from Novels into Films*. - Waikato University, 2009, p.7.
2. Persson P. *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery*. - Edinburgh, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.17.
3. Olsen S., Pettersson A. *From Text to Literature*. - Hampshire, Macmillian, 2005, p.11.
4. Abrams M. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. - Oxford University Press, 1999, p.121.
5. Fludernick M. *An Introduction to Narratology*. - London, Routledge, 2009, p.96.
6. Widdowson H. *Text, Context, Pretext*. - Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p.5-6.
7. Fitzgerald F. Scott. *Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. - Claremont, First Coyote Canyon Press, 2008, p.1.
8. Roth E. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. - Los Angeles, Paramount Pic. Inc., 2006, p.1.
9. Hall R. *Natural Blues*, 1999.  
<http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Natural-Blues-lyrics-Moby/2103E7948226792348256BC7001F342E>
10. “Natural Blues” by Moby. - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3YMxM1\\_S48](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3YMxM1_S48)

Prezentat la 01.07.2011