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Transmedialities: Performance at the Edge

Take home Essay: “Take one of the major scenes in ANGELS IN AMERICA. Consider how the scene has been adapted into the television film. Use articles that we have used on the course to assist your argument.”

Act 1 Scene 2. Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt at Cohn’s office. Cohn sits on the edge of his desk, continuously engaging in various telephone conversations while simultaneously talking with Joe.

Film is a medium of images

“Film is a medium of images.....In theatre..... language is the key element.” (1). Tony Kushner takes this premise to the extreme in his play *Angels in America*. Stage directions throughout are minimal, as are scene descriptions, using only the split scene technique to add dramatic effect, and to juxtapose the various elements in the play in terms of time and location. He strips theatrical tools down to simply the efficient application of language, the emphasis being on lengthy soliloquy (which he often disguises as intense dialogue).

However, in the scene to be discussed here, the use of obvious soliloquy is disguised in the form of didactic speech, punctuated by sparse comment by Joe Pitt and the switching between several telephone conversations by pressing lighted buttons on the telephone.

The content of the dialogue from play to film appears at first glance to have remained virtually intact. On closer observation however, one important element is left out. In the play, not only do we see Roy Cohn juggling many balls in the air simultaneously but we are subliminally introduced to a theme that, at a later stage in the story, becomes pivotal in Roy's demise: the reference to him 'borrowing' money (almost half a million dollars) from a client and failing to return it. This reference is removed from the scene in the film and replaced with intertextual references to other aspects of the narrative that will be dealt with later in this essay.

Focalization and other cinematographic tools

In the play, the use of language (including body language) must be strong enough to impart the author's message. The film has other tools at its disposal. Because film is a medium of images, the same scene, while giving us the same character information by the use of dialogue and interaction, can also be used to impart much more. Using cinematic tools such as enforced focalization our choice of loyalties is removed, and the division of power between the two men is set.

“The way in which an object is presented gives information about that object itself and about the focalizer”(2). The camera, the eyes of the viewer, is an External Focalizer. It looks down on Joe from over Roy Cohn's shoulder, or it sits on the floor behind Joe Pitt and looks up at Roy Cohn, framed in the light of the window behind him. The hierarchical position and the division of power have been set. The relationship has been defined as that between teacher and student, father and son, adult and child, or in broader terms between one 'with clout' (Cohn's own definition) and one without.

In the play the dialogue emphasises this relationship; the teacher (Cohn) says “I see the universe, Joe as a kind of sandstorm in outer space.... Ever have one of those days?” Having been replaced by image, this line is removed from and is not missed in the film.

The *mise en scene* of the film further underlines the division of power. Cohn sits on the edge of his desk, pressing various lighted buttons on his telephone, picking and choosing who he will or will not talk to. Joe sits in front of him, on a lower chair, responding to the snippets of information that are aimed at him. To Cohn, Joe is just one more button to be pressed. Cohn is bathed in the light of the window behind him, and almost shines.

Transtextualities

Mike Nichols has applied extensive use of transtextuality to put the film into its historical context, and to prepare the viewer by foreshadowing future incidents in the film. By the use of hypertext, photographs on the wall of Cohn with Reagan in a social (familial) setting, we are told that he was 'friends' with Reagan and that he is a Republican. There are framed newspaper cuttings on the wall of the Rosenberg trial, linking Cohn to their execution. In the play the audience is not yet privy to this information, though it can be assumed that

theatre goers will be able to link the name Cohn to the historical events that have brought him to where he is now. The photographs represent the 'ghosts' that are about to come back to haunt him. In the play the dialogue that has been cut from the scene in the film prepares the audience for Cohn's downfall: i.e. the reference to the theft of money, but the mis en scene, the cinematography and use of images warn the viewer that Cohn is about to fall.

Both the play and the film use Cohn's line: "... tell them to fuck off, tell them I died." In the play this line is spoken into the phone, to his secretary, and could be about anyone. The same line, in the film, spoken while there is a camera cut away to the picture on the wall of Reagan, Bush Sr. and Cohn himself is given an added weight. Again it foreshadows a future event: Cohn's demise at the hands of the Reagan administration.

In the opening lines, Cohn says "I wish I were an octopus, a fucking octopus. Eight loving arms and all those suckers." Intertextual, it refers to Danny Casolaro's discovery of the "vast, interlocking network of criminal conspiracy that reaches into every branch and agency of the U.S. government, many other national governments, and every sector of our societies." (aka Octopus)(4). Casolaro died before he could finish his investigations into the Octopus and write the book for which he undertook the research. His death was ruled a suicide, but the evidence supports murder. Danny died before he could "bring back the head of the Octopus".

Both men are dressed in grey, the walls are non-descript, but the food is brightly coloured. Sandwiches are garnished with cherry tomatoes, and conjure up images of the apple in Snow White or the bite of temptation in the Garden of Eden. Cohn, playing the part of the serpent or wicked Queen repeatedly invites Joe, who is as innocent as Snow White, to eat. The bite he is offered is the job in Washington. Then Cohn says on the phone to Mrs. Hollins "Deep voice you got..." like Red Riding Hood addressing the wolf. But who will be devoured by wolves, Joe Pitt, or Cohn? Both these examples illustrate the use of hypertextuality. "The term refers to the relationship between one text... "hypertext" to an anterior text or "hypotext" which the former transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends."(3).

Al Pacino, in the role of Cohn is himself a hypertext. Firstly we see the photograph on the wall of the cover of Esquire magazine with a portrait of Cohn wearing a halo and an evil smile. As Lucifer in "The Devil's Advocate" Al Pacino lures Keanu Reeves into a life powered by evil, offering him wealth and success in exchange for his soul. Cohn as the evil enticer is further emphasised when he hands Joe the sandwich pierced through with a wooden cocktail stick. Remembering Lucifer, immediately the link is formed to the killing of vampires (something supernatural, evil). But, the stake through the heart, set in the historical context, refers to the McCarthy trials that were later described as a 'witch-hunt'. There will be retribution for those involved in carrying out that 'witch-hunt'. Cohn will pay for his sins.

There is an assumption that a film must appeal to a wider audience than a play. "Films are everywhere now, almost as widely available as print or music."(5) Therefore we can assume that many of the film viewers are not aware of all the political issues that make up part of the narrative of the film. It is assumed that the theatre goer knows more about the context in which the play takes place. Therefore the film, aimed at this wider audience, may have information overload in its hypertext.

Actors and acting

It is hard to say whether the type of acting applied in the film compares or contrasts to the type of acting in the play. Going on the script alone, including the directions, it is clear that Cohn is highly strung, energetic and at least overpowering. The directions say "Joe is sitting, waiting", assigning him a passive role. For further interpretation it depends on the particular actor, and the interaction between him and the actor playing Cohn.

"The greatest performances are seldom noticed ... they do not draw attention to themselves, and do not seek to -"(6) and in the film, Patrick Wilson does an excellent job of

proving this premise. He is the Reflector Actor and his performance balances that of Pacino to perfection. His apparent lack of action enhances the flamboyant, charged performance of Pacino, who applies method to his acting with precision. But with a slight change of expression, or a look in his eye, Joe Pitt adds credibility to Cohn's behaviour. A seeming lack of action is the most powerful action of all. Joe Pitt does not manipulate the script, and Cohn can channel all his dialogue in his direction, giving the viewer the opportunity to draw his own conclusions.

Fidelity

Tony Kushner adapted his own play for film. It was also his choice to have Mike Nichols direct the film version. Mike Nichols is best known for his direction of the film "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" adapted from the Edward Albee play. He also directed "The Birdcage", the film of the Broadway production, "Le Cage aux Folles", about two homosexual men who own and run a nightclub. Cohn mentions the Broadway show and describes it as fabulous and perhaps hints at his own homosexuality. This intertextual reference links Mike Nichols to Angels in America, perhaps preparing the informed viewer for what is to come.

Mike Nichols successfully brings the fabula (Dr. C. Lord definition – essential elements of the story told in linear/chronological fashion), its political, religious message along with its criticism of society to the film screen, and without trimming the long, theatrical soliloquies successfully adapts the play to the large screen, and does so by applying the above mentioned techniques and more.

As with "The Birdcage" it is in fact by taking the risk of 'going over the top' that he creates a mesmerising film that engages the viewer. By the time the Angel smashes through the ceiling of Prior's bedroom we believe it completely.

References

- (1) Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*, pg 39
- (2) Mieke Bal, *Narratology: introduction to the theory of narrative*. Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1985, pg 152.
- (3) Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature, from don Quixote to Jean Luc Godard (x-xiv)*; 1 – 27, Ann Arbor,: UMI Research Press, pg 25.
- (4) Kenn Thomas and Jim Keith, *The Octopus - Secret Government and the Death of Danny Casolaro*. <http://www.constitution.org/col/octocaso.htm>
- (5) David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*. Eighth edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006. ch 1, pg 10
- (6) David Mamet, *Sense and Nonsense for the Actor*, pg 79.