

AMENDING CODES OF VIOLENCE FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Abstract: As canonic texts with their own identity of violence, Alice Walker's and Steven Spielberg's The Color Purple echo inflictions of patriarchal savagery on black womanhood to various degrees. The present paper will investigate alterations of such codes in the transition from novel to film. In doing so, it will rely on the translation of basic formal tropes from Walker's narrative (characters, point of view, focalization, tense, voice, symbolism), which will be provided other means of expression in the new medium, i.e., Steven Spielberg's film. Turning to Roland Barthes's essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" and to Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folk Tale, the analysis of structural sequences will examine which of Barthes's cardinal functions and/or catalyzers and of Propp's character functions are carriers of violence on page and on screen.

Key words: The Color Purple, women's oppression/abuse, black male/female, dominance and domination.

In analyzing the transfiguration from novel to screen, some critics are concerned with issues of textual fidelity and authenticity, which may seem less productive an approach than those that try to assess the narrative strategies involved in the process of transition. From a narratological perspective, this transition involves the translation of basic formal tropes of the narrative (characters, point of view, focalization, tense, voice, symbolism), which must all be achieved through other means of expression in the new medium. Many discussions concerning the narrative turn to Roland Barthes's essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966), which introduces the basic types of events that make the narrative units, and the ordering principle of narratives, asserting that "narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (79). Barthes has divided the segments of narrative into functional units further forked into a) distributional (*kernels* and *catalyzers*), which render the story in terms of actions, causes and effects and b) integrational (*informants* and *indices* proper), which refer to psychological states, attributions of character, descriptions of location and so forth. a) Distributional functions are further subdivided into a.1) cardinal functions or kernels (Chatman 145-6) that "cannot be deleted without altering the story" (Barthes 95), and a.2) catalyzers, which 'fill in' between key narrative events and are less pivotal: the catalyzer "accelerates, delays, gives fresh impetus to the discourse, it summarizes, anticipates and sometimes even leads astray" (ibid).

Barthes' division is both useful and necessary, since the various circumstances within which fiction and film narrative are situated depend upon the adapter's requirement and decision

¹ Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

to tamper with the source text. It comes as a natural conclusion that the more cardinal functions are preserved from the original source, the more faithful an adaptation is supposed to be.

This divide concerning narrative functions is required when discussing adaptations, since they make the distinction between what *may* be transferred, what *need* be transferred, and *must* be transferred in the adapted version to screen.²

With Alice Walker and with black feminist Western writing in general, oppression and violence have a dual representation with the same result. At a micro level, oppression is performed by the black male on the black female, who is regarded as an object of unrepressed violent drives of the male subjects, and who has to bear the damaging manifestation of this male blatant power. At a macro level, oppression is a form of dominance and domination of an emasculated Black male by an entire society (usually white American); this repression of the Black male will crystallize in the form of repression of the black female transferred from their gendered counterparts.

A. Structural sequences: the novel and film

A.1. Diegetic spaces in novel and film

The novel's main diegesis consists in the 68 letters that Celie addresses God and sister Nettie, while an analeptic hypodiegetic level is taken by the 22 letters Nettie writes home. The two levels superpose in two intertwining plots that act as important documents of cultural history: Celie's historical account is a black feminist document of female oppression, while Nettie's is a colonial story of African customs, tradition, development, and threat by the white colonists. In terms of visual transference, this subplot will be rendered graphically by letters framed in close-up shots and by descriptive syntagmas. Colorization to warm and saturated colors acts as a chromatic signifier with the same signified. Spielberg proves his directorial artistry through original editing decisions: for example, while Celie is reading Nettie's description of the African jungle, a sound makes her turn her head: a straight cut unexpectedly takes the audience to a medium shot of an elephant coming out of the African forest. The entire sequence incorporates the Africa-set subplots, with the Olinka tribe's rituals and the British colonization of the land. These are integrated as alternating syntagmas doubled by Nettie's voice over.

Walker's choice of the epistolary form for this novel highlights the story focus on the female subject and more importantly on her struggle within the patriarchal circle, her growth to an independent individual status: "Dear Nettie, I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time"³ (222). The syntax of this sentence shows the personal development of Celie, which is in sharp contrast with the semi-illiterate patterns in her first letters: "Dear God, My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I git back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready for school it be dinner time. He don't say nothing" (3).

The Color Purple is a novel whose narrative is overtly constructed around antithetical abstractions such as: suppression/liberation, male/female, community/individual, public/private,

² Brian McFarlane (*Novel to Film*, 1996) actually uses the term 'transfer' to refer to those narrative elements which are responsive and easy to transpose in the film medium, whereas 'adaptation' refers to the process whereby other narrative elements require rather different filmic equivalences that are difficult, if ever accessible, to transcode.

³ Alice Walker. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket Books, 1982. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are parenthesized as page number within the text.

and the meaning is decoded by the reader through this polar interplay. Walker embroiders these oppositions in a narrative whose meaning is made resonant through several symbols. Some of these are preserved or diluted in the film.

A.2. Structuring thematic and symbolic oppositions in the film

In point of theme, the film is redemptive: Albert violently separates the two sisters and contributes to their reunion, which he witnesses from a distance. But his narrative profile will be reduced to silence till the end of the movie. The circularity of the film is demonstrated in its visual imagery, as well: while it opens in 1909 with the two sisters clapping their hands in a sunlit field of purple flowers, singing: “Us never part/ Us have one heart/ Ain’t no land/ Ain’t no sea/ Can keep you away from me” (CP 00:01:03)⁴, the film ends with the two middle-aged women, clapping their hands together at dusk in the same game-song.

A powerful recurrent central symbol both in the novel and in the film is the hand which serves several functions, central being that of an agent able to inflict violence and wipe such savage acts. In the early scenes when the sisters clap their hands in the field of purple flowers, the hand is the bond between the girls, through which they promise each other they will never separate. In a different scene, Nettie’s fingers are dislodged one by one from the doorpost by Albert, this time his hand being a means of inflicting pain. Another brutal hand, that of Mr___’s son Harpo, flings a rock at Celie when she arrives. In pain she covers her wounded forehead with her palm and stumbles. While falling down, the camera focuses on a close-up of her bloody handprint on a large rock, and foresees the beatings Celie will get for not being Shug. The hand is also a means of offering comfort, and becomes the first signifier of Celie and Shug getting closer. When the hand holds a razor or a knife, it can shave, carve or kill. The director joins together two separate scenes from the novel that use hands and sharp objects as instruments. After Celie finds that Albert has hidden the letters from Nettie, she is on the point of cutting his throat with a razor while shaving him. In one of her letters, Nettie describes an initiation ritual of female circumcision and scarring children’s faces. In a scene full of tension achieved by fast cutting, Spielberg parallels Celie’s sharpening the razor with the preparation for the ritual, using a match-cut from razor to knives, from Celie’s holding the razor under Albert’s neck to hands holding knives against the faces of African children. This visual juxtaposition of two spatially and temporally distinct incidents into a parallel-cutting sequence obviates the opposition between an act of almost murder, and “a rite of passage” (204), as Bernard Dick calls it, while “the former interrupted and the latter completed” (ibid).

A.3. The comic sub-plot

Walker’s most radical re-visioning of the oppressive patriarchal social order lies in the transformation of Mr___. This transformation is from the position of the male oppressor to that of an expiated person, who leaves the phallogocentric social order reinforced by the sexual oppression of women. In Spielberg’s film, this portrayal is diffused and acquires a comic tone through an interesting technique: Mr___ is introduced to the audience in low-angle medium close-ups usually having Celie in the frame background. Usually such an angle is meant to empower the subject and to stress his commanding position. But this is not Mr___’s case: the effect of this camera angle is cancelled by the music score through a musical diminuendo insert in a minor key, in the way mixtures of guitar, flute and percussion riffs are commonly used in

⁴ *The Color Purple*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Warner Brothers, 1985. All subsequent references are parenthesized as ‘CP h: min.: sec.’ within the text.

stand-up comedies. Nevertheless, this transformation begins when Celie threatens his life, her curse disempowering him. At a visual level, this is clearly translated in the climactic scene at the end of Easter dinner, when Celie's outstretched hand (hand symbolism is reinforced once again) prevents Mr___ from hitting, a gesture which affirms Celie's new self-induced power.

Given that sexuality and power are so tightly "connected to politics of domination" (Hooks 58-59), Celie's husband has to be sexually disempowered as part of his transformation. This takes the form of a ritual enactment, as Shug actuates Celie into a spiritual awakening, where the belief in God as a white male authority figure is replaced by the vision of a loving God who wants the believer to celebrate life, to experience pleasure, a God who is annoyed, "if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere but don't notice it" (203). The novel *The Color Purple* (and the film as well, but to a lesser extent) regards Christianity and patriarchy as oppressive social structures, which preach inability to feel pleasure. As Bell Hooks puts it, "as oppressed and oppressor, Celie and Albert must learn to feel pleasure and develop a capacity to experience happiness and undergo transformation" (59).

B. Transfer of narrative functions in the film

B.1. Cardinal functions

In order to assess how closely the filmmakers tried to reproduce *The Color Purple* novel in cinematic signs, it would be relevant to consider the extent to which they have decided to transfer those narrative functions that are not language-dependent. Essentially, these are the major cardinal functions or nuclei, defined by Barthes as the "real hinge-points of narrative" (93).

a) The novel. Alice Walker's epistolary novel of 90 letters is constructed on the following cardinal functions essential in determining the overall movement of the narrative:

<p align="center">Cardinal functions in Alice Walker's <i>The Color Purple</i> (marked a), b), c) are some of the catalyzers) [the bracketed functions and catalyzers below are omitted in the filmic narrative]</p>	
1. Abused and pregnant by (step)father Alphonso, Celie is offered to Mr.____ into marriage, after her own daughter and son have been taken away from her at birth.	
2. Celie recognizes daughter Olivia in a shop six years later.	
3. Nettie leaves her father's home and comes to live with sister Celie and Mr.____. Soon Mr____ forces her to leave.	
4. Never hearing from Nettie again, Celie presumes her sister dead. [a)- Mr. _____'s two sisters, Kate and Carrie, visit and treat Celie with kindness, encouraging her to fight back against Mr.]	
5. Harpo, Mr.____'s son, marries assertive Sofia. [a)- Sofia and Celie decide to make quilt pieces out of the curtains.] b) Celie and Mr.____ advise Harpo to beat Sophia into submission. c) Physically abused, Sofia leaves Harpo and takes children with her.	
6. Celie cures Shug, Mr.____'s lover, who is brought to their house. The two women feel sexually attracted to each other. a) Celie takes Mr.____'s side when Mr____'s father reprimands his son regarding Shug.	
7. Harpo opens a juke joint and hires Shug to sing there. a) Celie is allowed to go there one night, and Shug sings a song dedicated to her.	

8. Celie and Shug get into intimate relationship.
 - a) Sofia fights Harpo's new girlfriend Squeak in the latter's juke joint.
9. Declining a request of the mayor, Sofia is imprisoned, beaten; she becomes the maid of the mayor's family.
 - a) Mary Agnes (Squeak) helps Sofia with the mayor's children, and begins to sing.
10. Shug returns to Mr.____ and Celie's house with new husband Grady.
 - a) Celie and Shug get closer friends and lovers.
11. Celie and Shug discover the letters from Nettie that Mr.____ has kept hidden from Celie. (Letter 51)
 - a) Blinded with rage, Celie wants to kill Mr.____.
12. Celie learns about Nettie's missionary work in Africa together with Corrine and husband Samuel.
13. Nettie writes Celie that Samuel and Corrine's children, Olivia and Adam are, in fact, Celie's lost children.
14. Nettie comes to live in Olinka village, which will be soon destroyed by British road-builders.
 - a) Celie learns that Alphonso was not her real father.
- [15. Shug takes Celie to Tennessee with her.]
16. Sofia returns home after a period of servitude of almost twelve years.
17. For the first time in her life Celie speaks her mind before Mr.____, announcing her intention to move to Memphis with Shug and Grady. (climax)
18. After she learns of her stepfather's death, Celie returns to parents' house in Georgia, and starts a business in pants design and tailoring.
 - a) Harpo and Sofia resume marriage.
 - b) Celie hires Sofia to work in her clothing store.
 - c) Shug returns to Georgia.
- [19. Mr____ /Albert and Celie reconcile.]
20. After Corinne's death, Nettie and Samuel get married.
 - a) Adam marries African girl Tashi.
21. Nettie and Samuel finally return to America with Olivia, Adam, and Tashi. They are all happily reunited.

Analysis:

Each of these is a major cardinal function, in Barthes's terms, a 'dispatcher', offering a 'risky' moment in the narrative in terms of the different outcomes which could result (e.g. Celie's father abuse of her own daughter may have not led to pregnancy). As cardinal functions, they work both sequentially and consequentially. Each of the cardinal functions listed above clearly leads to a further development in the story in cause-effect relation.

The catalyzers above mentioned constitute subplots: Tashi's circumcision and scarring as part of Olinka rituals, the employment Sofia gets in Celie's store or Shug's return to Georgia; these have significance in the overall plot, but do not influence its development dramatically. While catalyzers 4a) and 5a), besides others, were omitted in the filmic text, out of a common process of omission in adaptations, cardinal function 8 with Celie and Shug engaging in an intimate relationship was omitted out of the director's conservative views. Lesbian critics retorted in discontent at this controversial adaptation decision around Celie and Shug's lesbian act of love, which is merely hinted at in the film. Besides eliminating the explicit language (the book has overt references to 'titties' and 'pussies') in the novel, Spielberg eventually dropped a

scene in which Shug holds up a mirror to Celie's private parts to teach her about the beauty of her own body and sexuality. In the final cut of the film, the couple share only a few kisses in a scene tentatively played by Whoopi Goldberg and Margaret Avery.⁵

The film Spielberg created crosses the line between these poles, and diminishes both Walker's celebration of female culture and her grating portrayal of male breeding. These changes, crystallized in the added subplot featuring Shug's father, are also evident in numerous other elements of the film.

Function 19 above is cancelled in the film, somehow surprisingly, taking into account the director's atoning translation of male characters in the film. The exclusion of Mr ____ from Celie's circle will nevertheless emphasize her individual development and the complex identity she gains in the absence and at the expense of any male counterpart.

b) The film. Unlike the novel, whose plot line is suspended, the temporal frame of the film plot is precisely marked: from Winter 1909 to Fall 1937, covering a twenty-eight-year span. The major cardinal functions of the film's narrative may be listed as follows:

Cardinal functions in Steven Spielberg's <i>The Color Purple</i> [the underlined functions below are <u>additions</u> to the filmic narrative]
<p>Winter 1909</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Sisters Celie and Nettie play in the field</u>, Celie is pregnant. Celie gives birth to a boy, whom her father takes away from her. 2. Celie is forcibly married to Mr ____, who constantly abuses her. <p>Spring 1909</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Celie recognizes daughter Olivia in a shop six months later. 4. Mr ____ separates Nettie and Celie, commanding the former to leave his land. <p>Summer 1916</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Never hearing from Nettie again, Celie presumes her sister dead. 6. Harpo and Sofia get married. Sofia leaves Harpo. 7. Shug comes to live with Mr ____ and Celie. <p>Summer 1922</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Harpo opens a juke joint, Shugs sings there. 9. Celie and Shug get friends. 10. <u>Shug visits her father (the preacher) in church; failed attempt at reconciliation.</u> 11. Sofia is imprisoned for punching the mayor (episodic sequence). <p>Fall 1930</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. After she is released from prison, she becomes maid of the mayor's wife. <p>Spring 1936</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Shug returns to Mr. ____ and Celie's house with new husband Grady. 14. Celie and Shug discover the letters from Nettie that Mr. ____ has kept hidden from Celie.

⁵ See Carol M. Dole. "The Return of the Father in Spielberg's *The Color Purple*." *Literature / Film Quarterly*. vol. 24, no.1, 1996. In a detailed inventory regarding the transformations undergone by the Walker's novel, the author also reveals the attacks Spielberg's film received from the press and from the critics, who complained about the sentimental overtones accompanying the film, and especially about diffusing the effect that the novel's strong statements of the relationship between sexes and races have on the reader.

15. Celie learns about Nettie's missionary work in Africa together with Corrine and husband Samuel, and about Olinka village.
16. Celie throws her real thoughts into Mr___'s face and decides to leave him. She joins Shug and Grady to Memphis.
Fall 1937
17. Mr___/Albert is deserted and lives isolated from everybody else.
a) He visits the Naturalization service and pays for Nettie's return home.
18. Shug and her father reconcile in the church
19. Nettie and Samuel finally return to America with Olivia, Adam, and Tashi.
They are all happily reunited.
20. Albert watches family reunification from the distance.
21. Celie and Nettie in the field resume their childhood song and clapping hands.

Analysis:

Function 10, 18: As the tables above summarize, the film closely follows Walker's novel in terms of transfer of cardinal functions. As Carol Dole notices, *The Color Purple* "avoids any obvious repudiation of the Christian father. It does so in part by suppressing almost all references to religion" (Literature/Film Quarterly, page not mentioned). In the novel, Celie and Shug carry a six-page long discussion on theology, which is diminished in the film to a few disconnected lines placed just before the reconciliation scene between Shug and her minister-father. Shug's claim that God loves admiration is included in the film, as is (inescapably) the line that gives the 'work its title: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it". God is once referred to as "it" rather than "he" but so ambiguously that the antecedent of the pronoun is difficult to catch. Moreover, the conversation about God takes place while the women walk in a field of purple lavender whose visual impact is so strong that the mise en scene overturns the significance of dialogue. At a connotative level, lavender signifies homosexuality (*Oxford Talking Dictionary*, 1998), and in this respect the title and the symbolism of this flower are thematically integrated in the novel. The added function 18 regarding Shug's father emphasizes the gendered position of the film, which marks the restoration of the father as a patriarchal figure. Albert's position as a new better husband to Celie is rejected in the film, despite Walker's opposite decision. In revising these patterns, the director reduced the impact the novel's criticized ideology.

Function 1, 21: Apart from the fictional plot involving Celie and Nettie at the core, Spielberg seems to have a profound commitment to childhood, loss of innocence and coming-of-age, or childlike sense of wonder and faith. Besides the symbolism of hand already discussed, the opening and closing scenes with Celie and Nettie clapping hands are part of Spielberg's écriture as an auteur director.

Function 17, 20: Unlike the novel, the Mr___ character in film becomes a redemptive figure, who tries to atone his atrocious abuses of Celie: the film makes him the agent who pays at the Naturalization service for the return of Nettie's and Celie's children. Despite this act of expiation, his savage behavior was so excessively cruel, that he is past redemption, therefore denied entrance in Celie's restored life, a surprising directorial decision that had a rather softening conciliatory decision regarding representation of patriarchy in his film adaptation.

B.2. Character functions

In general, there is a considerable correspondence between the major character functions in Walker's novel and Spielberg's film: falling into the usual process of omission, some novel characters are entirely omitted in the film. For example, Mr___'s sisters (Kate and Carrie), Sofia's mother (Odessa) or Sofia's daughter (Henrietta) are dropped together with the rather minor subplots they acted in.

In terms of Propp's character functions, certainly not all of the 31 functions operate in *The Color Purple*, and some are completed below:

8. The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family: Mr___ abuses Celie. Mr___ chases Nettie out of his house and separates the two sisters in an atrocious gesture of absolute cruelty. Mr___ hides Celie's letters from Nettie for more than 25 years. It is interesting to note that Mr___ remains the villain in his barbaric acts half way through the novel and film. The reparation of his acts will be tackled through several hero subjects: by Shug in a direct way (she is the only one who dares to speak her mind in front of him), and by Celie in an indirect way by means of her own inner resurrection and strength.

8a. One member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something: Celie lacks love, identity, self-respect, and intensely misses Nettie.

9. Misfortune or lack is made known: the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched: Shug and Celie become friends, the former guesses the latter's needs and starts teaching Celie lessons which are race, ideology, and gender centered.

10. The seeker (hero) agrees to or decides upon counteractions: Celie has an unexpected evolution both in the novel and in film, rising from the role of the victim to that of the seeker of a new self and world.

16. The hero and villain join in direct combat: Celie pours her thoughts out to Mr___ for the first time on Easter day (the religiosity of this day emphasizes Celie's symbolical resurrection from old rigid patriarchal bonds).

18. The villain is defeated: despite redemptive acts, Mr___ is not granted forgiveness in the film; in the novel his defeat lies in his submission towards Celie in an unexpected reversal of power relations.

19. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated: by the end of the novel, Celie will have acquired her sister back, love, a successful business, and – above all – a sense of identity and belonging.

20. The hero returns: Nettie could be considered half a hero, taking into account her contribution to the development of the seeker and hero. Celie turns to be a hero as well, given that she had her own contribution to the liquidation of her own misfortune.

29. The hero is given a new appearance: this function is best identified in the film, where the mise en scene efficiently marks Celie's evolution. The costumes Whoopi Goldberg wears range from ugly simplicity (threadbare clothes) to sophistication (when she returns home to her parent's house Celie is a totally changed woman, wearing an elegant black deux-pieces with red gloves matching her red earrings).

30. The villain is punished: the novel obviates this function less, while the film decides to punish Albert to total segregation from his family.

The film uses several strategies to make its principal male characters more appealing and thus less offensive to audiences, but it is only partly successful. Mister commits unacceptable acts of brutality to Celie, abuses her sexually, and "uses her as an unpaid servant" (Joannou 176), but it is more his threats that are visualized rather than overt physical assaults. Moreover, like most of the other men in the film, he is given a comic stance more or less likable: he makes a fool of himself, is entirely ineffectual when he is scrambling to please his true love, Shug Avery, or

when he burns the food he cooked for her in an attempt that ends with the explosion of the stove.

Spielberg uses hands as visual signifiers for bondage and unification, as a tool able to inflict violence and to wipe its effects, too. The director's decision was actually suggested by Celie's final letter in the novel which marks the same symbolism of the hand as a primary bond of kinship: "Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each other's arms (...) Nettie never let go of my wrist" (293). Celie celebrates her unification with sister Nettie in a cosmic address: "Dear God. Dear Stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" (292)

Conclusion

Approaching identity issues concerning race, gender, class, and nationality, Walker's novel is a manifesto of postcolonial, transnational feminist writing practice. *The Color Purple* provides a description of the cultural expression and effects of race and gender oppression, patriarchal family and community, colonization but only indirectly "indicts the material or economic motivations of social reproduction" (Richards 116). The essential 'story' of Walker's novel is preserved (violence, physical and verbal abuse of black women, child birth, new identities and voices). For a variety of reasons which have to do with Spielberg's auteur signature, the film has chosen to dilute several ideological features of the novel, especially those related to lesbianism and violence inflicted on womanhood. The harsh black feminist points the novel approaches, with unbearable acts of heavy violence inflicted upon the woman's body are diffused by Spielberg and rendered a rather romantic light.

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