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The Fox: D. H. Lawrence's Short Novel in Mark Rider's Film

The Fox: A Novela de D. H. Lawrence no Filme de Mark Rider

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ABSTRACT

This paper has as one the main objectives to investigate the particular reading of the modern short novel *The Fox* (1976), by the English writer D. H. Lawrence in Mark Rydell's film, analyzing the theme of completeness, its rewriting on screen through the characters' love affair, and its fit into the parameters of the cinematographic system, with a new narrative configuration closer to the social and cultural discursive claims of the reception context. As theoretical background, we have taken into consideration ideas on literature and film adaptation in Cattrysse (2014) and Lefevere (1992), as well as some criticism on Lawrence's work in Janaki and Sumathi (2019), and Greiff (2001).

Keywords: D. H. Lawrence. Adaptation. Narrative. Short novel.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como um dos principais objetivos investigar a leitura particular da novela moderna *The Fox* (1976), do escritor inglês D. H. Lawrence, no filme de Mark Rydell, analisando o tema da busca de plenitude, sua reescrita na tela por meio do relacionamento afetivo entre as personagens, seu enquadramento nos parâmetros do sistema cinematográfico, com nova configuração narrativa, mais alinhada às demandas discursivas sociais e culturais do contexto receptor. Como fundamentação teórica, levamos em consideração as ideias sobre literatura e adaptação de Cattrysse (2014) e Lefevere (1992), bem como a crítica sobre a obra de Lawrence por Janaki e Sumathi (2019), e Greiff (2001).

Palavras-chave: D. H. Lawrence. Adaptação. Narrativa. Novela.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

The modern short novel *The Fox* (1923), by D. H. Lawrence, following traditional patterns of the genre, has a linear plot with the definition of time and space, and delineated characters. However, it is quite innovative in presenting a range of complex themes and controversial discussions, which defy beliefs and social conventions, and in questioning the concepts of gender and sexuality as a source of criticism on the British political and cultural system. The narrative tells the story of the characters Nellie Marsh and Jill Banford who share an ordinary life together in the region of Berkshire during the World War I. They do housework, take care of animals, and farm the land for their survival. Then, Henry Grenfel, a former soldier who was in the army in Canada, returns and realizes that the place was no longer his grandfather's propriety. He is welcomed by the new owners and stays there for a period of time. From then on, a new order in the narrative is established with the break of the previous harmony observed in the relationship of the residents. The plot shows the complexity of their emotional involvement, which highlights a central theme in Lawrence's work that is the deep and wide concept of love in modernity, reinforcing, then, a classical unity in his vision of man (GONÇALVES, 1997, p.105).

This paper aims at investigating the short novel and its film adaptation *The Fox* (1967), by Mark Rydell, analyzing the way the theme of self-fulfillment was written through the characters' relationship, constructed to fit the parameters of the new language system. We start from the point that, by effacing ambiguity in the representation of an alleged homoerotic relationship between Marsh and Banford in the book, making it more explicit on screen, the movie simplify the question to establish a dialogue with new discursive claims of the production and reception contexts. As theoretical background, we have taken into consideration ideas on film adaptation and rewriting by Cattrysse and Lefevere, as well as some criticism on Lawrence's work by Beynon, and Greiff.

2 ADAPTATION AS A TRANSLATION PROCESS

The process of translating books into films has been a source of discussion in different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Adaptations as any sort of rewriting have the power of introducing new concepts, genres, and mechanisms in a certain social system. As part of their constitutive traits, the manipulation process arises. In order to clarify the way it happens, Lefevere has established an important difference between common

readers and specialized ones. To him, specialized readers have an important role in the image creation of texts to general publics, once they are responsible for the reception and survival of these texts, as he asserts:

That construct is often loosely based on some selected passages of the actual text of the book in question (the passages included in anthologies used in secondary or university education, for instance), supplemented by other texts that rewrite the actual text in one way or another, such as plot summaries in literary histories or reference works, reviews in newspapers, magazines, or journals, some critical articles, performances on stage or screen, and last but not least, translations (LEFEVERE, 1992, p.6-7).

It is seen in the above statement the great variety of means by which a text may be rewritten, and the power rewriting exerts over the literary system by introducing, spreading and consolidating new parameters, responsible for the displacement of the works' function in the reception system. So, translations also assume the condition of creators of images of a text or a set of texts, amplifying interpretative potentials, as the author has emphasized:

In the past, as in the present, rewriters created images of a writer, a work, a period, a genre, sometimes even a whole literature. These images existed side by side with the realities they competed with, but the images always tended to reach more people than the corresponding realities die, and they most certainly do so now (LEFEVERE, 1992, p.5).

In this sense, questions involving rewriting are greatly linked with the poetics of the target literary system, once projections are made in two ways, promoting or rejecting the literary prestige of a certain piece of work. So, the images created are of great relevance to the spread of a literary universe, a writer, or a set of writers over the cultural system.

This is what adaptations usually do as an end product, as Cattrysse (2014, p.236) reinforces their nature and functioning in the reception contexts. To him, a film can be seen as an adaptation to the extent that its source materials form a more or less overt part of its total presentation, and the more the source materials are highlighted in a filmic narrative, the more it may be said to be presented as an adaptation.

In order to set how much the adapted text is connected with the source text, Cattrysse (2014, p.237) has showed possible cues to be found in the adaptation that make one see how close it is or is not to the original, namely, textual, peritextual, and paratextual. The first set of cues refers to the appearing of the source text in the text itself, as the case of the film *Atonement*, by **Joe Wright** (2007), upon which the novel *Atonement* (2001), by Ian McEwan, is based. The author discusses the process of writing, and the filmmaker chose to highlight the handling of the creative process in the film. The second occurs when indications

of that an adapted text have been physically annexed to the adaptation, for example, the book cover, film's title, credits, or voice-over commentary on DVD, as the movie *The Fox*, by Mark Rydell, in which is made clear since the beginning traits of Lawrence's book to viewers. And the third set refers to those cues which appear physically in separated texts as trailers, posters, pressbooks, presentations at press conferences, interviews etc, highlighted as an adaptation made by a famous director; for example, *The Color Purple* (1986), by **Steven Spielberg**, adapted from the homonymous book by Alice Walker.

As we can observe, independent on differences or similitudes towards the source text, in the reception of film adaptations, and their recognition as such within the cinematographic system, viewers may receive images from various literary universes produced in different literary systems and historical contexts on screen. So, these productions consolidate new possibilities of readings, which are greatly affected by both filmmakers' interpretative potentials and the dialogue established with the social structures of the cultural system. These assumptions will be of great importance to the following discussions on *The Fox*, by D.H. Lawrence, and its adaptation to the cinema.

3 THE FOX AND D. H. LAWRENCE'S LITERARY UNIVERSE

Lawrence is known as one of the most creative modern writers in English for producing literary texts, which encompassed several genres, and a range of complex themes that defied conservative values of England at the beginning of the twentieth century. His very particular way of writing and vision on the literary writer claimed that the process of creation should be affected by the individual perceptions of conventional aspects of the social daily life, such as language, religion, family, politics etc, to show how complex and mutable relationships are.

A remarkable trait in the author's writing is the traditional narrative structure used in his works. Unlike other modern texts that show more experimental and impressionistic characteristics, as observed in the works of his contemporaries English writers, he made the choice of constructing his narratives with a more linear development, showing more realistic situations. But, at the same time, Lawrence also brings innovation to his texts through the depth of the discussions raised by the presence of controversial themes.

This is the case of the short novel *The Fox*, which was written between 1917 and 1919, revised and published in 1923. Marked by an objective style at first sight, it unfolds in a quite straight presentation of situations and themes. However, it also creates a particular

narrative pace with subtleties in its development in which the reader is constantly defied to understand ambivalent points and motivations for some narrative movements, as the nature of the main characters' relationship, Banford and March.

At the beginning of the narrative, the girls are described by their surnames. The reader has the piece of information that they got the farm, with the purpose of taking it as a source for survival, but there is also an indication that this previous plan was not completely successful. Then, the delineation of each character starts, and the reader begins to visualize traits and definition of their personalities and social roles in that place. By describing Banford, the narrator affirms:

The two girls were usually known by their surnames, Banford and March. They had taken the farm together, intending to work it all by themselves [...]. Unfortunately, things did not turn out well.

Banford was a small, thin, delicate thing with spectacles. She, however, was the principal, for March had little or no money. Banford's father, who was a tradesman in Islington, gave his daughter the start, for her health's sake, and because he loved her, and because it did not look as if she would marry. March was more robust. She had learned carpentry and joinery at the evening classes in Islington. She would be the man about the place (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.1).

As we can see above, traits of each character's behavior, and of their visual appearance show to the reader a new way of living in which the traditional family structure towards social conventions of the time has been questioned. The text puts emphasis on two independent women who manage their own business without the interference of their parents or brothers, as it usually happened in that context, once they are not married, although before dying, Banford's grandparent had lived with them for some time. However, despite their sharing of activities in the house and in the farm, it is showed an unbalance in their relationship, for each of the girls plays a stereotype of domination: Banford represents power and domination over March for her financial conditions; and March represents in a way domination through her physical abilities for handling with carpentry, and pragmatic attitudes.

It is noticed, therefore, one of the first ambiguities in the development of the narrative, concerning the presentation of innovative themes. These characters are placed in a context of isolation, fighting for survival in that limited place, without any external interference, but, at the same time, this gives to them an extraordinary power of choice and autonomy in the way they lead their own lives. Yet, even with this sense of freedom towards social conventions, it can also be observed that in their relationship marks of a patriarchal familiar structure remain for each character playing a specific gender role, including the male

figure suggested by March's description, showed as "she looked almost like some graceful, loose-balanced young man" (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.3) .

Banford, in turn, as a tradesman's man daughter in Islington, had his help to this beginning of the new life in the farm, because besides being beloved by him, her father also had realized that she would not be inclined to marriage. This fact reveals an important aspect of the writer's discussion in the narrative that is the character's independence on marriage.

As the story unfolds with the delineation of characters' social roles, some hints on the way reality is perceived by them starts being made clear to the reader. Whereas Banford seems conformed with the dynamics of a simple life, keeping worried about setting things around, as going to the village to buy food, for example, March, in another perspective, is seen as the one with unsatisfied tendencies what makes her vulnerable to transcend the limits of that isolated world.

So, opposite viewpoints of their attitudes towards life are showed, bringing tension to the relationship, as the narrator asserts:

Although they were usually the best of friends, because Banford, though nervous and delicate, was a warm, generous soul, and March, though so odd and absent in herself, had a strange magnanimity, yet, in the long solitude, they were apt to become a little irritable with one another, tired of one another (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.5).

The discrepancy between their perceptions on life brings the sense of incompleteness that may be associated to the concept of integral man, and to the possibility of reaching out towards the sources of vitality discussed by Lawrence in his novels, as he states:

The whole is greatest than the part. And therefore, I, who am man alive, am greater than my soul, or spirit, or body, or mind, or consciousness, or anything else that is merely a part of me. I am a man and alive. I am a man, and alive. I am a man alive, and as long as I can, I intend to go on being man alive (LAWRENCE *apud* ABRAMS, 1974, p. 2148).

Following Lawrence's principles, relationships must be taken as a way of making the individual reach down into the mindless centers of his personality through the exploration as an attempt to fulfill one's own self. It brings to *The Fox* the idea of instinct or natural energy with sexual connotation.

In March's case, the search for the unknown displays energy towards a sense of reaching out new values and experiences as a result of her unconscious need for fulfillment. Two important events in the narrative trigger something as a sort of planes of consciousness,

what greatly affects the character, leading her to new insights: the encounter with the fox and Henry's arrival in the farm.

Since the beginning, the presence of the fox is disturbing, bringing instability to the place for being described as the one responsible for chaos, as the narrator says: "Since the war the fox was demon. He carried off the hens under the noses of March and Benford" (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.4).

This situation makes March react and attempt to hunt the animal. Then, one evening at the end of August, she was standing with her gun under her arms, and hair pushed under her cap when she saw the animal:

She lowered her eyes, and suddenly saw the fox. He was looking up at her. His chin was pressed down, and his eyes were looking up. They met her eyes. And she knew her. She was spellbound – she knew he knew her. So he looked into her eyes, and her soul failed her. He knew her, he was not daunted (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.7).

As we can perceive, the fox brings a new force with a suggestion of domination over March, for he faces her, exerting a certain fascination over the character.

Another situation that shows evidence of this new force is when Henry arrives. He is the young guy greatly described by his youth and strength, who also makes her feel affected by new impulses. Let us see:

The young man – or youth, for he would not be more than twenty – now advanced and stood in the inner doorway. March already under the influence of his strange, soft, modulated voice, stared at him spellbound (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.12).

But to March he was the fox. Whether it was the thrusting forward of his head, or the glisten of fine whitish hairs on the ruddy cheek-bones, or the bright, keen eyes, that can never be said: but the boy was to her the fox, and she could not see him otherwise (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.13-14).

These passages above are important, not only because they anticipate the coming discussion on the connections between the animal and the boy, but also to introduce one of the most important aspects of Lawrence's themes to readers, or rather, the sense of vital forces. In this sense, the fox may be seen as a symbol of masculine energy that catches the character's attention, and makes her aware of something primeval in her. The exploration of this energy gets an ultimate point when March dreams of the animal in that day she had met the guy:

That night March dreamed vividly. She dreamed she heard a singing outside which she could not understand, a singing that roamed round the house, in the fields, and in the darkness. It moved her so that she felt she must weep. She went out, and suddenly she knew it was the fox singing. He was very yellow and bright, like corn. She went nearer to him, but he ran away and ceased singing. He seemed near, and

she wanted to touch him. She stretched out her hand, but suddenly he bit her wrist, and at the same instant, as she drew back, the fox, turning round to bound away, whisked his brush across her face, and it seemed this brush was on fire, for it seared and burned her mouth with a great pain. She awoke with the pain of it, and lay trembling as if she were really seared (LAWRENCE, 1976, p.22-23).

From then on, March, who is the most restive of the two girls, starts moving to a new direction towards her own life. Since the beginning, the analogy to the natural fox is established through the vivid description of nature and of the animal in his vital state.

By discussing the role of nature in Lawrence's work, Janaki and Sumathi (2019, p.61) have pointed out that the author has used it exquisitely in his novels by the intermixing of fecund earth and love sick minds. For them, "His treatment of nature is simple and direct, mingled with an aura of sensuousness [...] His lovers felt that nature reechoes their physical and mental vibration" (JANAKI AND SUMATHI, 2019, p.61).

This is what may be observed in the above case of March's dream of the fox. The vividness in its description, and its power bursts on the readers' consciousness that for March "the fox represents an escape from her present deadening life, an escape conceived in increasingly sexual terms", as reinforces Engel (1973, p.106).

This narrative strategy makes clear interesting philosophical principles discussed by Lawrence in his works, as he reacts against the neglect of the modern man to the preservation of one's own self. In order to so, the author formulates a kind of theory to set the terms for the individual psyche in which each individual has a "dark self", an "active consciousness", which exists independently, and is prior to the ordinary mental consciousness.

By explaining this theory, Jacobson affirms that nothing matters but the health of the psyche:

When the psyche is healthy, the dark self, which is the true source of the passions, the true center of response to the outside world, has primacy and power over the mental consciousness, which should properly do more than transmute the "creative flux" of life into what Lawrence called the "shorthand" of ideas, abstractions, principles, ideals (JACOBSON, 1973, p.137).

It is then observed that the main problem raised is the disturbance in the relationship of forces within the individual, and the mental consciousness with its ideas and ideals. This breaks the tripartite aspect of integrality in which reason, body and emotion should take their own place in the process, being so the source of unbalance that may interfere in the creative life, and in the search of completeness.

So, although *The Fox* is a text with an apparently simple plot and linear narrative structure, we have seen that it also brings lots of representative elements of Lawrence's

complex literary universe, as demonstrated elsewhere through the analysis of the novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (SILVA, 2017). Just like this novel, *The Fox* also “opposes, not only to the social and political system, but also to the destabilization of a whole paradigm of the modern rational civilization” (SILVA, 2017, p.58), what have certainly represented a great challenge to directors who intend to translate it into screen, as Mark Rydell did in 1967.

4 THE FOX ON SCREEN

The film adaptation of *The Fox* at the end of 1960's starts a cinematic outburst of Lawrence's works and was released close together and during a renaissance period for the writer in the cinematographic system. In the years following this production, two other important appeared: *Women in Love* in 1969, by Ken Russell, and *The Virgin and The Gypsy* in 1970, by Christopher Milles.

To understand the rewriting of these works on screen and functions taken in the cinematographic system, one should take into account the major change in critical status and reputation that affected Lawrence during the 1950's through the re-appraisal and revival of his main themes. This phenomenon brought about a shift in the social attitude towards the writer's work, and a change in both the publication practice, and attitude amongst critics and academics.

As an attempt to justify the shift in critics' position which started a process of renaissance in Lawrence's literary production, Beynon (1997, p.54) has presented some reasons to explain why Lawrence's ideas seemed more serious and acceptable to mid 20th century readers than they used to be at the moment the texts were published. For him:

Also, western society by that time had developed more permissive standards regarding sexual behaviour so Lawrence's writings about sex no longer seemed as shockingly “licentious” as they had to earlier readers. [...] Concurrent with and more important than all the writings about Lawrence then was the large-scale reprinting of his own works in England and America (BEYNON, 1997, p.54).

This statement shows the new position taken by the writer and his works, and provides an overview of the social and historical circumstances in which the film adaptation of *The Fox* was released, being the first American production based upon Lawrence's texts.

This new social and historical context of production and reception of the film contributes to the setting up of its new narrative configuration, showing particular traits in the rewriting of Lawrence's literary universe. The film tells the same story of the book with two girls living together in a farm, working and trying to set things right in their daily routine.

Then, at the end of the winter, a former soldier who was in the army in Canada returns and realizes that the place was no longer his grandfather's propriety, and that it belongs to the girls. Once he has nowhere else to go, the women allow him to stay with them in exchange for helping with the work.

As a way of connecting images of a natural setting with those from the book, and of anticipating Lawrence's relevant themes to spectators, at the beginning, the filmic narrative shows the landscape of an isolated farm in rural Canada in the winter period, with the house and lots of snow. The place is depicted in an apparent chaotic situation in which characters struggle to support themselves by raising chickens and dealing with heavier works.

Although it depicts the same storyline of the book, one can also see important shifts to the way the filmic narrative focuses on character construction, and their search for self-fulfillment. For example, the ambiguity in the presentation of the girls' relationship in the book is effaced what makes it explicit to spectators. This fact becomes relevant to understand the functioning of the film adaptation in the new social context, because rather than going deep into Lawrence's complex discussion, it tends to become more superficial.

A piece of evidence of that occurs at the very beginning when characters are still being presented on screen. Jill Banford (Sandy Dannis) is shown massaging Ellen March's back (Ann Heywood). Then, she goes upstairs, enters her room and undresses herself, standing still in front of the mirror. She looks at herself, turns the light off and starts masturbating. Immediately after, the two of them are seen laying on their bed as a couple, and the camera moves towards the window as if it were in search of something outside.

By showing the nature of the bond between Banford and March as a homosexual relationship on screen, the movie also addresses to the theme of sexuality from the book, but not in the same perspective. Whereas in the book it is only part of a broader discussion on the sense of exploration of one's own self, in the film, it becomes one of the central arguments for the narrative construction. As a consequence, the filmic narrative gains a more erotic appeal on screen.

Another example that reinforces this new direction in the filmic narrative perspective is the way the character Paul Grenfel (Keir Dullea) is constructed on screen. Unlike his description in the book in which sources of vitality are greatly marked, in the film he is no longer the young guy with no more than twenty, instinctive and aloof, but, instead, he is represented as a mature, more experienced man, who also feels spellbound by March, as he is also able to rationalize feelings, and sets seduction plans. He devotes her attentions, and proposes marriage to her, what arouses Jill's resentment and jealousy. So, as in the book, the

character's representation to spectators also establishes a clear analogy with the fox, although some differences may be observed. Henry Grenfel, who is named Paul Grenfel in the film, probably as an analogy to Paul, character from the first adaptation based upon Lawrence's work in the cinema *The Rocking Horse Winner* in 1949, by Anthony Pelissier, shows himself off more for his intelligence and slyness than for his youth and spontaneity, as the short novel reinforces.

Although this shift of perspective brought to the narrative, by putting emphasis on both physical and intellectual character's traits, then moving away from that of the book that focuses more on the physical one, it also makes an interesting dialogue with Lawrence's work in the reception system. Firstly, it recovers the cinematographic memory of a character from a previous film adaptation, consolidating images of the literary universe to spectators, and secondly, it reinforces an important theme of this universe that is man's unbalance for the excess of reason over instinct, as Janaki and Sumathi have summarized Lawrence's ideas: "He wants to create an awareness to live in harmony with nature and utilize the resources for the satisfaction of basic needs without harming the natural world" (2019, p.65).

By discussing *The Fox* as a movie which sweeps aside conventional concepts of what can or can not be articulated on film, Greiff (2001, p.23) asserts that it can be analyzed as something new to the parameters of industry. For him,

The heavy-handedness in the film, finally even to Rydell himself, result partly from his attempt to turn *The Fox* into an erotic show-and-tell of sorts, a graphic demonstration of several sexual options available to humankind. The on-screen catalog includes heterosexuality (Henry and Dullea) in the barn), lesbianism (Heywood and Dennis in bed or in the snow), and masturbation (Heywood and her bathroom mirror) (GREIFF, 2001, p.52).

As we can see, the film expanded some thematic possibilities from the literary text, exploring subtexts, and making explicit ambiguities and situations regarded problematic at the moment it was published.

This cinematic strategy highlights the challenges to adapt Lawrence's short novels to the cinema, and the possibilities they offer as a starting point for cinematographic transformations. It boils down to the fact that the genre may give the opportunity for a balance between two difficult extremes for filmmakers: on one hand, they have to overextend the universe in order to fit it into the cinematographic language, and, on the other, to condense aspects of the texts.

5 FINAL REMARKS

As we have observed throughout our discussion, by adapting the short novel *The Fox*, by D. H. Lawrence to the cinema in the contexts of the 1960's, Mark Rydell, although taking relevant aspects from the literary universe of the book, expended its universe to suit the reception context. The case of the explicitness of the ambiguity showed in the short novel on the representation of an alleged homoerotic relationship between Ellen Marsh and Jill Banford, for example, may be taken as of great relevance to understand the new narrative construct on screen. With this more sexual appealing component depicted to spectators, the film, unlike the book that discusses sexuality in a deeper sense as a source of vitality, in which instinct becomes a vital energy for the search of self-fulfillment, simplifies a fundamental question raised by Lawrence in the book, his criticism on the excess of modern man's rationalization of body instincts.

Despite the new narrative configuration, the film makes an interesting dialogue with Lawrence's literary universe, by giving emphasis to some of its relevant themes, by connecting with the social and cultural aspects of the reception context, and with the new discursive claims and new perceptions by critics.

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