Traumatic Film Adaptations: Baz Luhrmann's Cases of 'Cinematic Sublimes': *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *The Great Gatsby* (2013)

Ileana JITARU
Ovidius University of Constanța

Abstract: *Departing from the customary approach of trauma studies that identify mainly the pattern of violence and the effects propagated inside the content of the narrative, the present paper regards form rather than content, namely the process of adapting two classic texts, William Shakespeare's play* Romeo and Juliet *(1594) and Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel* The Great Gatsby *(1925) into two postmodern films by Australian director Baz Luhrmann [*Romeo+Juliet *(1996) and* The Great Gatsby *(2013), respectively]. The transcription of text to screen is mediated by photographic or cinematic processes of selection, inclusion or exclusion, frame composition in the mise en scene, cinematography, editing, sound, as well as the appropriation of theme to an intended audience. Based on Jean-François Lyotard's influential work* The Differend: Phrases in Dispute *(1983), this analysis will concern the relationship between trauma and the* differend*, which Lyotard does not explicitly link. Turning our attention to the above two postmodern film adaptations, this investigation aims to show – through the concept of 'traumatic sublime' – that the matters of testimony, trauma, and the sublime are not only interdependent but also essential in determining how Luhrmann's films respond, by unconventional mechanisms of adaptation, to the call of the differend when adapting two patterns of 'classic' literature to the big screen.*

Keywords: *trauma vs. differend, cinematic sublime, film adaptation, Baz Luhrmann*

1. From *the differend* to the *traumatic* to the *sublime*

The study of film as adaptation of literature has been placed under the shelter of praise or blame, and the rule of judgement has been influenced by either by the degree of fidelity / resemblance / rewriting / duality of the latter in relation to the former or by a poise of singularity / marginality / circumspection / novelty / genuineness / authenticity / disjunction between the source text and the target film. In his work *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Jean-François Lyotard discusses several forms of disparity, of which *litigation* and *differend* are central: "As distinguished from a litigation, a *differend* would be a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (xi). The domain of film adaptation opens two forms of *differend*: one between the source (novel, play, poem, history event) and the actual adaptation. A second type of *differend* may result from different versions of the same source text that compete for confirmation in the new medium, the film: "One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy" (Lyotard xii). As any *differend* involves an implicit need to be resolved, we could wonder which is the judging tool that could solve the litigation between the book and the film? Is it the historical écart? Is it the profile of the audience? Is it discourse specificity?

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In the same study, Lyotard postulates that the construction of a sentence implies several rules, called its *regimens* such as "*reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering*" (xii). The language of film adaptations uses 'phrases' that belong to different regimens according to the intention of the adapter. Syntagms from "heterogeneous regimens" may lead one to the other in accordance with an end fixed by a genre of discourse, literature and film in the case of adaptations. Genres of such distinct discourses (text and image) offer specifics meant to connect heterogeneous linguistic and aural-visual syntagms, that are appropriate to fulfil the effect intended by the adapter on the audience: "*to inform, to know, to teach, to do justice, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate, to produce emotion*" (Lyotard xii). But if phrases belonging to different regimens or genres, such as literature and film, compete with each other to the point of giving rise to *differends*, this competition is open based on certain common properties, which in the case of the two is the source narrative to be adapted and the resulting adapted target narrative.

Turning to *sublime*, Lyotard reclaims the concept from thinkers such as Longinus, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. For Lyotard, the *sublime* feeling, unlike the harmonious appreciation of the beautiful, is a "violent emotion, close to unreason, which forces thought to the extremes of pleasure and displeasure, from joyous exaltation to terror ... as tightly strung between ultraviolet and infrared as respect is white" (Lyotard 7).

Lyotard believes that the sublime may be interrogated in two distinct ways: the modern and the postmodern: while the former designates a feeling of nostalgia and loss (the sublime in the adaptation thus becomes the lost content), the latter becomes the focal point for dissemination, urging an ethical point of resistance. The clash between classical or modern aesthetics of the literary text and the postmodern aesthetics of film adaptation becomes a form of the sublime, allowing the (sometimes) unpresentable to be reshaped only as the missing content; while the form, owing of its medium specificity, continues to comfort the viewer and offer pleasure.

In the case of film adaptations that are supposed to bridge centuries (take adaptations of Shakespearean plays, or classical novels or modernist literature), the adapters must find phrases of the filmic discourse able to appropriate Elizabethan language, in a process that might result in a *differend* between the two. The accessibility of contemporary postmodern filmic language to equate Elizabethan drama often results in an articulation of much trauma, especially if unexpected adaptations are placed in the mirror with previous, more classical filmic versions. If we were to discuss Baz Luhrmann's filmic versions of *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and *The Great Gatsby* (2013), these may be regarded as traumatic when interpreted in relation to previous directorial visions like *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. George Cukor, 1936)**,** *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), *The Great Gatsby* (dir. Jack Clayton, 1974), which had better complied with more conventional rules of finding

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equivalences in the filmic language. The arising *differend* between the expected mechanism of construction of a classical text and the unexpected rewriting contained in a postmodern adaptation often seeks to express the full disruptive nature of trauma. The director's justification of traumatising a classical text seeks comfort in the redemptive capabilities of the cinematic sublime that the audience will experience as part of the film reception.

2. The deictics of Baz Luhrmann's adaptations

In the above-mentioned study, Jean-Francois Lyotard addresses the function of *deictics*, which anchor the instances of a current spatiotemporal origin named "I-here-now". Within the linguistic space, these deictics are markers of reality, designating their object as an extra-linguistic permanence, as a "given". The 'subject of the uttering' [*sujet de l'enonciation*] is the addresser instance in the universe presented by the current phrase. This instance may be marked by a proper name or a pronoun (*The queen visits London* / *How should we know*?) or left unmarked (*Don't speak!*). Apart from the linguistic elements of deixis, filmic deixis incorporates elements like the filmic narrator / addition and omission / emphasis on the chronotope / casting and performance / critique of theme - motif - symbolism.

The novel *Great Gatsby* opens with precise elements of deixis uttered by the first-person narrator Nick Carraway: "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been running over in my mind ever since. 'Whenever you feel like criticising anyone,' he told me,' just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had'" (Fitzgerald 26). Baz Luhrmann adapts the novel's deictics to the voice-over narrator of the same internal Nick Carraway narrator (Tobey Maguire), who takes us slowly with a zoom-in into *The Perkins Sanitarium,* where he receives treatment for the depression he is captive under, after the events he is about to narrate in the large flashback that will compose most of the filmic narrative:

NICK: In my younger
and more vulnerable years...
...my father gave me some advice.
"Always try to see the best in people,"
he would say.
As a consequence,
I'm inclined to reserve all judgments.
But even I have a limit.
Back then, all of us drank too much.
The more in tune with the times we were...
...the more we drank.
And none of us contributed anything new.
(*The Great Gatsby*, 00:00:00-00:01:56)

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The 'subject of the uttering' is a thematic characterization by Fitzgerald achieved in a direct and indirect way, by the same personal internal narrator Nick Carraway who provides his side of focalization of the main character in a monologue:

> When I came back from the East last autumn, I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention for ever (…). Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction - Gatsby, who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away.
>
> (*TGG* 26[1])

The film groups the complexity of the medium into an impressive complex deictics of linguistic, aural and visual signs, this time in a dialogue between Nick Carraway and his doctor. Nick is a patient diagnosed as "morbidly alcoholic, insomniac, [with] fits of anger" (*TGG*[2] 00:02:10), who has a session with his doctor that changes the monologue from the novel into a dialogue in the film:

When I came back from New York,
I was disgusted.
DOCTOR:
I see, Mr. Carraway.
NICK:
Disgusted with everyone and everything.
Only one man was exempt from my disgust.
DOCTOR:
One man?
Mr. Carraway?
NICK:
Gatsby.
DOCTOR:
Was he a friend of yours?
NICK:

[1] Quotes from the novel *The Great Gatsby* are from Fitzgerald, Francis Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. London: Penguin Books, 1925/2003 and will be provided as in-text citations, followed by (*TGG* page).
[2] Quotes from the film are from *The Great Gatsby*, dir. Baz Lurhmann, Warner Bros, 2013 and will be provided as in-text citations followed by (*TGG* hour: min: sec).

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He was...
...the single most hopeful person
I've ever met.
And am ever likely to meet again.
There was something...
...about him, a sensitivity.
He was like...
He was like one of those machines
that register earthquakes 10,000 miles away.
DOCTOR:
Where'd you meet him?
NICK:
At a... At a party...
...in New York.

(*TGG*, 00:01:56-00:02:30)

After Nick's opening narration introduces the film's deixis, the camera zooms-out rapidly into a fast-editing sequence of shots that visualize a fervent 1920s filled with vice and immorality, as critique of the Jazz Age, under the background of jazz and hip-hop music. The poor lighting, desaturated colours, camera whirl movement with fast zoom-ins / zoom-outs, superimposition of shots and music patterns become the film elements of deixis that translate the "I-here-now" of the novel of the roaring twenties into a version that may be traumatic to an audience accustomed with the more classical soft unobtrusive style of adaptation, which was the case of director Jack Clayton's 1974 version. The fast intercutting of shots fading out and in one after the other emphasizes the confusion and delirium of the 1920s, with Nick's voice-over narration in simultaneity: "Stocks reached record peaks and Wall Street boomed in a steady golden roar. The parties were bigger, the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser" (TGG 00:03:34-00:03:53).

Part of the sublime with Baz Luhrmann's version lies more in the visual effects and the aesthetics of the movie than in the characters. The house has majestic doors which are an entrance into a totally different and inaccessible world, paved with money and luxury. The eerie sophistication of Daisy Buchanon from the novel is endorsed by a suave Carey Mulligan, a woman "who mesmerises men with a promise of excitement and a voice full of money" (Desmond, Hawkes 249). Unlike Mia Farrow, the Daisy of the 1974 Clayton's previous adaptation, Luhrmann's choice of Daisy embodied by Carey Mulligan contributes to the feeling of the sublime that becomes part of the American Dream in Fitzgerald's novel. Tom Buchanon is described by the novelist as arrogant; again, Luhrmann's preference for Joel Edgerton seems a more appropriate choice than Bruce Dern, the 1974 version of Tom Buchanon, who had personified the shortish snobbish look of Tom described

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by Fitzgerald in the novel. Regarding Jay Gatsby himself, pictured in the novel as "elegant young roughneck" (*TGG* 32), who is rumoured to have killed a man, who is fabulously wealthy and who visibly does not belong to the upper class he claims to be part of, Luhrmann softens this description by casting Leonardo di Caprio, again a better fitting option than Robert Redford, the 1974 Jay Gatsby. With his performance and style, di Caprio embodies a Romantic character, close to Fitzgerald's intention of Jay to represent "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (*TGG* 3).

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* Cathy Caruth states:

> If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet. (3)

Such an approach stems not only from a great number of trauma theorists sharing an intellectual background in the literary field but also from their understanding of the fact that the trauma in the content, manifested in the characters' experiences, is an occurrence that might become diagnosed as trauma at the level of form, troubling the very principles of narrative.

With Baz Luhrmann, the characters' traumatic experiences from the source texts (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) are provided a double traumatic equivalent in the two films. On the one hand, there are similar traumatic nuclei in terms of narrative content. On the other, there are traumatic unconventional modes of representation at the level of cinematic form: "traumatic events are rarely experienced with such temporal immediacy; that is, to experience a trauma really means to re-experience it (…) we know trauma only belatedly, though its symptoms. Sublime art departs from the site of the trauma" (Slade 89).

3. Traumatic sublimes

Romeo + Juliet **(1996)**

Romeo and Juliet write the tragic trauma and its effects of misunderstanding the mutually violent disjunctions between Romeo's Montagues and Juliet's Capulets. With reference to the adaptation of William Shakespeare's play, "Elizabethan dramatic texts invite more latitude, and adapters are more likely not only to abbreviate dialogue, but to use it outside the framework provided by the original" (Jackson 19).

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The Australian director chose to open his *Romeo+Juliet* film with a version of the prologue, but broadcast on a new medium, the television, in a different era, to a 20th century audience. In doing so, the filmmaker decided to appropriate the prologue as a news report, offering modern-day images that could decode Shakespeare's language. The prologue is iterated twice: the first time by the TV news anchor and once again inside the news bulletin. This second time, the adapted prologue preserves elements of Elizabethan dramatic discourse through superimposition of voice-over narration and graphic titles that summarize the entire plot. The entire opening scene is marked by fast editing to visualise the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets in a journalistic style inspired by the footage of the investigation of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992. In this manner, the director acquaints the audience with Shakespeare's plot against a familiar contemporary media coverage of violent clashes, another form of *differend*.

Replacing a customary dramatic slow-paced crescendo common to many other film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, the opening scene in Baz Lurhmann's adaptation is filled with glancing references to current film genre hypes: the Western, the gangster movie, the kung-crime thriller, the action comedy, the gangster movie. Such borrowings, hostage to the shifting glossy surfaces of the film form, become "a deliberate built-in feature of the aesthetic effect meant to enter our awareness of the pre-existence of other genres" (Jameson 76). The film's music is no longer classical compositions, but an unexpected mix of chorus, hip hop, electronic, disco or pop music. The score in *Romeo + Juliet* was composed by British music producer Nellee Hooper, Scottish composer Craig Armstrong and English music composer and producer Marus de Vries. It was arranged, orchestrated and conducted by Craig Armstrong under the performance of the London Session Orchestra and The Metro Voices, and becomes part of the aural sublime of Luhrmann's 1996 adaptation.

The accumulating tension in the opening scene introducing the prologue is supported by the opening score, which fuses bombastic choral sequences produced by The Metro Voices and flamboyant orchestral pieces by the London Session Orchestra. This opening scene ends with the film's title *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet*, which is removed off screen by a wipe from right to left, in a cut reminiscent of a 1970s TV Cop Show. This wipe introduces the Montague Boys, who are filmed from behind while driving in their convertible car and wearing Hawaiian shirts.

Part of Luhrmann traumatic sublime is the quality of this adaptation, which retains approximately 70% of the original dialogue, while placing the action in Verona Beach, in a hyper-stylized present-day location. Luhrmann's preference is justified by the fact that this timeless story about teenagers should be aimed at contemporary teenage audiences, and Luhrmann's music-video version succeeds both due to good casting and fast-paced editing or flashy mise-en-scene.

Some of Lurhmann's decisions might appear traumatic to some audiences - the setting of *Romeo & Juliet* is updated to a modern Veronese suburb, where the

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teenage members of the Montague and Capulet families carry guns, and, when the clash begins, they instantly shoot at each other. The flamboyant cinematography and innovative elements of montage (wipes, fade out/fade-ins) rewrite Shakespeare's plays as relevant to a contemporary style of editing specific to a variety of current film genres other than the drama, which would be a filmic genre equivalent to Shakespeare's drama by the canonical laws of conventional adaptation. This film aims at a modern young audience taste for kinetic, fast moving, spectacular visual and musical effects. Luhrmann has created a world in which the extreme wealth of the two families is evident in the pastimes, dress and lifestyle of their younger generation. The mise en scene displays characters who wear expensive outfits, drive fancy sports cars and pride in big shiny guns. The fight at the beginning of the play becomes a spectacular gunfight at a petrol station and the party at the Capulet mansion is a sumptuous rock-star style lavish celebration. Deafening pop music plays throughout and fireworks are visual-auditory markers of the Capulets' affluence.

***The Great Gatsby* (2013)**

Gatsby's novel "evokes and celebrates the American Dream" (Desmond, Hawkes 252) but in so doing the author also convicts the social forces that stifle it. Fitzgerald's theme is disillusionment, but a sublime one, based on the elation that "is worth losing the world for" (252). In *The Great Gatsby* film, Luhrmann appeals to a disruption of the novel's linear chronology, which becomes a frame-story narrative in the film; Nick Carraway is preserved as a first person narrator mainly through voice-over. Unlike the novel, which is narrated in retrospection, the film opens into a main diegetic level with Nick Carraway in a mental institution. This opening scene will step down through a lap dissolve into the hypodiegetic level of narration, embedded in the main narrative as an analeptic story. From this point on, the film becomes a vacillating fluid, moving up and down between the embedding diegetic level of Nick Carraway as a retrospective narrator and the embedded hypodiegetic level, narrating the traumatic events in West Egg, New York in which Nick Carraway is a participant character-narrator. Actually, the confessional sessions in which Nick is treated for depression in the main diegesis will lead to the birth of the novel *Great Gatsby*, as Nick's therapist encourages him to transcribe his recollections into a novel. In so doing, the resulting metanarrative benefits Nick as treatment for, and recovery from, the traumatic events that had transformed him into a patient diagnosed as "morbidly alcoholic, insomniac, [with] fits of anger, anxiety" (*TGG* 00:02:11).

The sublime in the traumatic adaptation by Baz Luhrmann lies in this new visual signature featuring vertiginous camera movement, operatic scenes, anachronistic musical score, and general sense of visual abundance and excess. Like the *differend*, trauma, in effect, issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge.

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In both films, Luhrmann installs musical performances ranging from gospel to pop and R&B, jazz, rock and disco. In so doing, the director opens a confrontation between his film and Shakespeare's play or Fitzgerald's novel with the intention of placing under the magnifying glass a consuming intertextuality which is part of the traumatic postmodern sublime, which lies in a "connotation of pastness and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history" (Jameson 76).

*

Literature and film have long coexisted by virtue of such a reciprocal process, in which the mimetic nature of the latter becomes evident in the relationship between narrative and audience. Luhrmann's adaptations, his 'traumatic sublimes', are therefore to be understood not simply as a response to the events in an Elizabethan play or a modernist novel, but more as a subsequent response of the contemporary director, attesting to the cause for further instances of trauma. As a result, the film adaptation becomes a genre of testimony to literature, embedding a paradox, namely that of testifying to an experience (the events in the source narrative) that an audience must understand and indulge in several centuries later, through a filmic medium that is predicated on modes of identification and comprehension.

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