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POSSIBLE WORLDS IN SAM SHEPARD'S *FOOL FOR LOVE* AND ITS CINEMATIC ADAPTATION

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to compare Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*, published in 1983, and its cinematic adaptation directed by Robert Altman, released in 1985, in terms of the notion of possible worlds (in the philosophically-oriented branch of cognitive poetics). In her discussion of possible worlds, Marie-Laure Ryan proposes a typology of accessibility relations (identity of properties, identity of inventory, compatibility of inventory, chronological, physical, taxonomic, logical, analytical, and linguistic compatibility) in order to account for how the sense of the reality of our actual world reverberates in fictional worlds. Ryan also offers another typology, that is, the internal structure of the fictional world (knowledge worlds, intention worlds, wish worlds, obligation worlds, and fantasy worlds) to show how the characters' different conceptions of the world define and build up the narrative structure of fiction. It is argued that the change of medium – drama into film in this case – results in some changes in the possible worlds projected, since verballity and visuality give rise to some differences in terms of modes of perception. Also discussed is the significance

in this regard of the spatio-temporal scope, which is confined in the case of drama, a genre often conceived to be performed, whereas in a movie the director is able to expand this scope as the occasion demands.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, *Fool for Love*, Robert Altman, Marie-Laure Ryan, adaptation, narratology, possible worlds

Introduction

In her theorization of film adaptation, Linda Hutcheon proposes three interdependent perspectives. In one of them, she declares:

An adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This “transcoding” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation. Transposition can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama. (7-8)

One can, we argue, consider Hutcheon’s formulation of transposition or transcoding in terms of a conspicuous shift in “possible worlds,” as well. Almost always there appear new scenes in conjunction with the characters’ different conceptions of the world that tend to define and build up the (new) narrative structure in the new medium transcoded. Deploying Marie-Laure Ryan’s Possible Worlds model, the present paper aims to shed light on an adaptation of drama into film, in this case Sam Shepard’s *Fool for Love* and Robert Altman’s adaptation. It is argued that the film makes some changes in the possible worlds projected, since verbality and visuality give rise to some differences in modes of perception. Also discussed is the significance in this regard of the spatio-temporal scope which is confined in the case of drama, a genre often conceived to be performed, but is expandable in a movie as required.

The Concept of Possible Worlds

“Possible worlds” theory can be regarded as a subcategory of cognitive poetics, which itself is broadly concerned with how mind and language work. It constitutes the more philosophical tendency in cognitive poetics. This theory can be traced back to the seventeenth century and Leibniz’s concern with

philosophical logic. Leibniz maintains that there exist “an infinity of possible worlds . . . as thoughts in the mind of God,” and among these worlds, only one is the actual world (333-4). Later, this gave new direction to structuralists of the mid-twentieth century and persuaded them to form an alliance with the later post-structuralists. Roland Barthes, the prominent structuralist theorist in the first phase of his career, for instance, announced that “there are countless forms of narrative in the world” (237). A few years after Barthes and since the 1970s, a number of literary critics (Umberto Eco, Lubomir Doležel, Thomas Pavel, and Marie-Laure Ryan) began to extend this notion to the field of narratology, literary semantics, and literary theory. Adapting the theories mainly developed in logic, these scholars have developed a semantics of fictionality, arguing that literary texts project semantic domains that must be considered as actual possible worlds. In other words, these worlds must be considered as actual the moment we as readers immerse ourselves into a work of fiction. In line with this, Gerald Prince remarks:

Narratives comprise temporally ordered sequences of states of affairs that are taken to be actual/factual (“what happens”) and that are linked to other states of affairs considered non-actual or counterfactual and constituted by the mental activity of various characters (their beliefs, wishes, plans, hallucinations, fantasies, etc.). (77)

Thus, “as an interdisciplinary approach,” in Ruth Ronen’s terms, the notion of “possible worlds” helps us understand how the semantics of fictionality propelled by the literary text is an “Alternative Possible World” (henceforth APW) that operates as the actual world the moment the reader is immersed in a work of fiction. This is what Ryan terms “recentering” that makes the reader enter “a new system of actuality and possibility.” That is, “not only one new actual world, but a variety of APWs revolving around it” exist (22). Thus an event or a series of affairs are possible so long as they do not contradict the laws of logic. Among all the worlds that exist, one holds the center and the rest of “possible worlds” are connected to it by a relation of accessibility. Yet, the question is which one has the right to be called the authentic actual world? From an absolutist viewpoint (e.g. Rescher), the central actual world (henceforth AW) is ontologically autonomous, and the others are the products of imagination, dream, etc., and thus counted as “possible worlds.”

Ryan's Typology of the Internal Structure of Fictional Worlds

For describing the internal structure of “the textual universe as a dynamic combination of textual actual world (henceforth TAW), on the one hand, and the different types of alternative possible worlds formulated by characters, on the other hand” (Semino 86-7), Ryan suggests that the possible worlds as private worlds or virtual domains exist in the thoughts or minds of the characters (110). Moreover, Ryan expatiates on the characters’ mental activities that are composed of two sorts of elements: “some involve truth-functional and fact-defining propositions while some others do not” (111). As for the first group of propositions, Ryan enumerates “‘thinking that p,’ ‘hoping that p,’ and ‘intending p,’” and in regard with the other group of propositions, she offers “the emotions, subjective judgments, and fleeting perceptions before they are turned into knowledge” (111). These propositions have to be integrated to constitute “the image of a world” (111).

Ryan proposes that there are some APWs that constitute the narrative universe and the conflicts within them engender the plot development and its tellability. Additionally, Margot Norris declares that by modification of the fictional modalities Marie-Laure Ryan restricts them “to the private worlds in the minds of characters rather than by treating them as operatives of world- construction” (9). The private worlds are as follows:

1. *Textual Actual World (TAW)*: what is presented as true and real in the story;
2. *Knowledge World (K-World)*: what the characters know or believe to be the case with the T/AW;
3. *Prospective Extension of K-World*: what characters expect or hold to be future developments in TAW;
4. *Obligation World (O-World)*: the commitments and prohibitions constituted by the social rules and moral principles which the characters are subject to;
5. *Wish World (W-World)*: the wishes and desires of the characters;
6. *Intention World (I-World)*: the plans and goals of the characters;
7. *Fantasy Universes (F-Universes)*: the dreams and fantasies of the characters and the fictions they construct. (Ryan 113-123)

Ryan's Typology of Accessibility Relations

In logic, particularly in Kripke's formulations, possibility and accessibility are used interchangeably (see Ryan, "Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations" 557). Ryan, likewise, maintains that a "world is possible if it satisfies the logical laws of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle: (p OR -p) AND NOT (p AND -p) (A proposition must be true or false, and not both at the same time)" ("Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations" 557). The accessibility relations included in Ryan's framework are listed "in decreasing order of stringency" (*Possible Worlds* 2). In other words, fictional worlds that only break rules from the top of the list are closer to the actual world than fictional worlds that also break rules from the bottom of the list. The crucial point, however, is that Ryan's model makes it possible to describe fictional worlds in terms of a scale of increasing distance from the actual world. However, Ryan suggests that the notion of textual world "presents a *referential* domain," and that it is also "a mental representation constructed on the basis of the propositions asserted in or implied by the text. The world of a text of narrative fiction can be thought of as a container filled with the characters and objects referred to by the text" ("Impossible Worlds" 369; emphasis in the original). Ryan Adds that a fictional text has references to a world despite the fact that this world cannot exist independently of the text because "the conventions of fiction allow language to create objects by merely mentioning them. As in all uses of language, the mental construction of fictional worlds relies heavily on *inferences*" ("Impossible Worlds" 369; emphasis added). Therefore, under the influence of David Lewis' "indexical theory," Ryan relies on the text itself and whatever references or inferences it gives rise to as true and by and large welcomes any inconsistencies, in the sense of Logicians' use of the term, and as a cognitive theorist prioritizes the readers of the literary fiction, for they "have a broader of sense of *worldness* than logicians, and because they do not treat inconsistencies as an excuse for giving up the attempt to make inferences" ("Impossible Worlds" 369; emphasis added). Accordingly, Ryan proposes nine types of accessibility relations in order to account for how fictional worlds echo the sense of the reality of our actual world. The list follows as:

- A. *Identity of properties (abbreviated as A/properties)*: TAW is accessible from AW if the objects common to TAW and AW have the same properties.

- B. *Identity of inventory (B/same inventory)*: TAW is accessible from AW if TAW and AW are furnished by the same objects.
- C. *Compatibility of inventory (C/expanded inventory)*: TAW is accessible from AW if TAW'S inventory includes all the members of AW, as well as some native members.
- D. *Chronological compatibility (D/chronology)*: TAW is accessible from AW if it takes no temporal relocation for a member of AW to contemplate the entire history of TAW. (This condition means that TAW is not older than AW, i.e., its present is not posterior in absolute time to AW's present. We can contemplate facts of the past from the viewpoint of the present, but since the future holds projections rather than facts, it takes a relocation beyond the time of their occurrence to regard as facts those events located in the future.)
- E. *Physical compatibility (E/natural laws)*: TAW is accessible from AW if they share natural laws.
- F. *Taxonomic compatibility (F/taxonomy)*: TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds contain the same species, and the species are characterized by the same properties. (F usually follows from E, but some divorces of taxonomic and physical compatibility do occur and will be discussed below.)
- G. *Logical compatibility (G/logic)*: TAW is accessible from AW if both worlds respect the principles of non-contradiction and of excluded middle.
- H. *Analytical compatibility (H/analytical)*: TAW is accessible from AW if they share analytic truths, i.e., if objects designated by the same words have the same essential properties.
- I. *Linguistic compatibility (I/linguistic)*: TAW is accessible from AW if the language by which TAW is described can be understood in AW. (Ryan, 558-59)

Moreover, the other relevant central concept is “the principle of minimal departure” in that the expectation is the resemblance of TAW to AW in all aspects, whereby the TAW is accessible from AW at most.

Discussion

Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* (1983) – along with *Buried Child* (1977), *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977), *True West* (1980), and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) – is considered to be the ultimate “family play.” However, the techniques practiced in *Fool for Love* are more intricate since the play, identical to *Buried Child*, hints at a turn in Shepard's writing away from the antirealism of his earlier texts. It focuses on the memories of the past intermittently narrated by the characters, especially Eddie and May, in order to delve into the family history. *Fool for Love* is a “more expressionistic work toward an almost hyper-realism that zooms in on the idiosyncratic lives of ordinary people struggling with extraordinary conflicts” (Johnson 167). There exists a constant fluctuation between the real and the hyperreal as the play shifts from memory to the truth of everyday life. In his 1985 adaptation of *Fool for Love*, Robert Altman, well-known in the filmmaking world as an auteuristic director, crafted a slightly different cinematic version. Reflecting on the auteur theory or theory of authorship in Robert Altman's oeuvre, Robert Self believes that

Robert Altman films illustrate Michel Foucault's contention that the concept of “author-function” is “tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses . . . it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subject positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy.” (4)

Recently, a documentary has been released about Altman that introduces the term Altmanesque. The discourses mentioned associated with the term are delineated as “(1) characterized by naturalism, social criticism, [and] subversion of genres; (2) not conforming to predictable norms; [and] (3) indestructible.” Altman's other recurring discourse is the priority of the memory and the past on the grounds that Altman's recourse to the flashbacks, or insistence on the stream of consciousness very nearly manipulates the original screenplay.

Altman himself confesses: “I have a bad reputation with writers, developed over the years: ‘Oh, he doesn't do what you write.’ . . . Ring Lardner was very pissed off with me” (qtd. in Thompson 18). *Fool for Love* is no exception. Some critics have discussed the differences between the play and its adaptation, and by and large treated it adversely. Johan Callens, for instance, declares that “the movie add[s] prominence to the play's Western elements, simultaneously af-

firming and debunking them” (69). Similarly, Andrew Sarris, the acclaimed film critic, deprecates the film, stating: “Quite simply, a very effective play has been stretched out into a very ineffective movie. . . . What was ritualized, stylized, or merely mentioned on the stage has been rendered with a brooding ‘realism’ on the screen” (qtd. in Saddik 206). However, manifestly rejecting Hollywoodian premises, Robert Altman, particularly in *The Player* (1992), and Sam Shepard, in *Angel City* (1976) and *True West* (1980), go well with each other. As far as *Fool for Love* is concerned, though, each of these “authors” creates his own distinct ontological constitution within a different medium. Each of them constructs a unique narrative universe allied with discrete possible worlds. In what follows, we will try to shed light on some aspects of these different versions of “world-building.” Shepard’s *Fool for Love* has four characters. The lovers, Eddie and May, are half-siblings involved in an incestuous relationship. The Old Man, their common father, is dead but is fully visible on the stage and often talks to Eddie or comments upon the happenings. Martin is May’s would-be date whose presence stirs up the significant old memories, particularly divulging the innermost secret through Eddie’s and May’s narratives (that they are actually half brother and sister, and the Old Man is their father). In addition to these four principal characters, Robert Altman adds seven other characters to the film version – Mr. Valdez, May’s mother, Eddie’s mother, teenage May, teenage Eddie, young May, and the Countess – which serves to focus to a greater degree on the AW extended beyond the stage and to make the plot more accessible. This contributes to the consolidation of “the principle of minimal departure.” Shepard’s play starts *in medias res* in a confined setting, in a motel somewhere in the desert. In fact, as with a realist setting, TAW of the play is populated by the same species as AW and the characters who are ordinary people engaged in the familiar pursuits of everyday life. This is decisively in line with the “reader’s real world knowledge and experience but it may also exceed the real world” beyond its possibilities (Hart 113). Yet, there are incongruities, the first of which occurs in reference to the Old Man whose presence on the stage does not give the impression of being a real character. As Shepard’s stage direction has it,

He [the Old Man] exists only in the minds of MAY and EDDIE, even though they might talk to him directly and acknowledge his physical presence. THE OLD MAN treats them as though they all existed in the same time and place. (Shepard 20)

In this unnatural narrative, the relation *G/logical* is severed in this case, since there exists no respect for the principles of non-contradiction and of excluded middle; as long as this principle is not maintained, a world does not maintain some kind of connection to the actual world. Thus, we are in a logically inconsistent world where people can be dead and alive at the same time. “Apparitions, waif-like beings, and corpses occasionally infiltrate Shepard’s stages,” says Matthew Roudané (279). In this case, the Old Man coincidentally exists and does not exist, like “Schrödinger’s cat”,¹ which is, of course, logically impossible. There are other similar examples in Shepard’s plays: a Ghost Girl in *Mad Dog Blues* (1971), Pop, or Stanley Hewitt Moss in the one-act *Holy Ghostly* (1970), and Henry Moss in *Late Henry Moss* (2000). This would problematize the ontological boundaries that are blurred and opaque here. This means that the play projects worlds in which the boundaries between ontologically disparate domains are transgressed – the world of the dead and the world of the living.

Conversely, Robert Altman starts the movie in the motel grounds and the desert, diverging from the dramaturgical techniques prevalent in Shepard’s theater. In the movie’s beginning, the empty, fertile desert is shown in a panoramic view, and gradually the viewer’s perspective shifts to an image of a motel from above. The Old Man lives in a trailer surrounded with the rubbish behind the motel, playing the harmonica. His physical presence is more emphasized in the movie, or, to put it another way, he is shown mostly in the flesh. In one scene, for instance, the Old Man rummages through Eddie’s truck, apparently looking for liquor, stirring Eddie to run out and chase him away, screaming: “Hey, what the hell you doin’ in that truck?” In some other scenes, he as a bum wanders through the motel, making eye contact and interacting with Eddie and May. Hence, the director (un)consciously maintains the relation *G/logical*, or at least reduces its intensity to make head for the principle of minimal departure.

Another example of incongruity, not present in the play but shown in the film, is the scene in which the Old Man, in his youth, along with May’s mother and the teenage May, are seen in one of the motel bungalows. The adult May, in

¹ See Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative/Science Entanglements: On the Thousand and One Literary Lives of Schrödinger’s Cat,” *Narrative* 19 (2011): 171-186. Ryan uses Schrödinger’s cat as a test case for the study of the relations between narrative and science. She deploys the rules and interpretations pertaining to quantum mechanics of Schrödinger such as the paradox-denial interpretation, the split-reality interpretation, the Copenhagen interpretation, Wigner’s Friend, and many worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics, and tries to link them to narrative practices.

parapsychological fashion, witnesses teenage May. While the little girl is swinging, the adult May pursues her and hugs her but May's mother makes a dash for the teenage May and takes her back. Evidently, within a realistic fashion so far, the postmodern locale discordantly forges an impossible world insomuch as the past and the present are mingled. Clearly, *chronological compatibility*, in the way Ryan has defined it, does not apply to this case, since there is no mention here of science fiction or stories about the future.² In Altman's version, it is regarded as time-travel hence, the relations *E/natural* laws and *G/logical* are manifestly lifted. The former is severed because based on natural laws the human reason is not cognizant of such happenings within his/her own actual universe. As for the latter, it turns out to be contradictory and perplexing for the viewer to recognize the past and the present simultaneously in a single image, hence, the severing of the relation *G/Logical* in the movie again.

In regard with the APWs and their conflicts, both the play and the film project some fantasy universes with their own distinct TAW and ontological independence. In double recentering mode or "[I]n the space-travel mode," Ryan argues, "consciousness relocates itself to another world and, taking advantage of the indexical definition of actuality, reorganizes the entire universe of being around this virtual reality" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 103). In the play, the reader/audience merely immerses into the other TAW and listens to some stories, narrated in Eddie and May's recollections, wherein there are some accounts of their childhood centered on the Old Man. May challenges Eddie's *K-world* in his narration by remarking that "[N]one of it's true. . . . He's had this weird, sick idea for years now and it's totally made up" and adds that "[Y]ou don't even know which end [in this story] is up anymore" (51). Eddie, in like manner, challenges May's *K-world* and addresses the Old Man thus: "She's lying" (51). Thus, in this case, in Ryan's terms, there appears a particular form of "enigma, which stems from an incomplete *K-world* with well-defined area of indeterminacy" (121). As such, the reliability of the narrators is questioned, though it still obtains. In the film version, however, the director in the same scene makes some significant changes through which the viewers are bound to wholly lose their trust in the narrators. The stories or fantasy universes that exist in the minds of the Old Man

² Such scenes are rare in literature. Some memorable examples are found in Audrey Niffenegger's novel *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003). The novel partly partakes of the genre of science fiction; yet, an identical situation is designated where Henry, a time traveler, travels backwards, meets his younger self, and relates to him physically. Consequently, *D/chronological* is partially relaxed.

and Eddie as *K-worlds* are “visualized and validated in the film, giving it a reality of its own, apart from individual consciousness” (Saddik 213). Ontologically speaking, Altman’s adaptation is an autonomous, exclusive one due to the fact that by the time Eddie or May narrate happenings in their past; coincidentally, the viewer not only listens to them but also sees the images of their flashbacks. Yet, almost always whatever is narrated does not fall in with the image shown on the screen. The Old Man’s recollections, for instance, correspond to those stated in the play, but the images are to some extent divergent. The Old Man tells May about the night they were traveling in a car. “We’d been drivin’ all night and you were sound asleep in the front. And all of a sudden you woke up crying. . . . Woke your mom right up and she climbed over the seat in back there with you,” he says (*Fool for Love* 32). Yet, the flashback shown questions the Old Man’s *K-world* because May’s mother is awake and is laughing with the Old Man, and the teenage May, in like manner, is silent and does not cry at all.

The same occurs in Eddie’s story. Eddie remembers that after the Old Man bought a bottle of liquor, “he opened the bottle up and offered it to me. Before he even took a drink, he offered it to me first. And I took it and drank it and handed it back to him” (*Fool for Love* 32). This memory, however, does not match its image in the movie since the Old Man does not offer Eddie anything. Similarly, in another example, Eddie mentions that “we were completely silent the whole time. Never said a word to each other” (*Fool for Love* 32), whereas in the movie they are talking to each other. Both in the case of the Old Man and that of Eddie, then, there is a conflict between the *K-world* and its reference world in the flashbacks in images that give rise to the distortion of the truth. The other conflict, or incompatibility, is between the Old Man’s and by and large the society’s *O-world* of incest and the half-sibling’s *W-world* of love. Eddie and May in the movie are shown simply as lovers in the foreground and their *W-worlds* of love are passionately enhanced in two main ways. First, there is the character of the Countess who is just mentioned in the play, but shown in the movie to highlight the amorous relationship between the main characters. Secondly, there is the character of Martin whose presence in the movie creates a sort of competition over May. Also, the other pertinent incompatibility occurs between Eddie and May’s *K-world* and *W-world* as they are aware of the facts in their life and know that their relationship is not morally right; yet, they insist on fulfilling their desire.

Conclusion

The shifts in adapted movies could be fruitfully related to the issue of the possible worlds. As we have tried to briefly show above, some of these shifts are due to the shift in medium, but some are related to the kinds of appropriations (formal, ideological, discursive) a director factors in his adaptation of literary texts. Our case study, Altman's *Fool for Love*, well exemplifies this. The movie is an attempt to radically revise the play by adding new scenes and generally directing (the director as an "auteur" or "re-authoring" agent) the film in a way that the perceptions of the characters about each other and towards AW significantly change, not only structurally but also semantically. That is, cognitively, there are remarkable changes in the general orientations of the play and its film version.

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MOGUĆI SVJETOVI U DRAMI *LUD OD LJUBAVI* SAMA SHEPARDA I NJEZINOJ FILMSKOJ ADAPTACIJI

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U ovom se članku usporedno analizira drama Sama Sheparda *Lud od ljubavi*, objavljena 1983. godine, i njezina filmska adaptacija u režiji Roberta Altmana iz 1985. godine, pri čemu je u žarištu razmatranja koncept mogućih svjetova (iz filozofski orijentiranog područja kognitivne poetike). U raspravi o mogućim svjetovima Marie-Laure Ryan predlaže tipologiju odnosa pristupačnosti (identitet svojstava, identitet inventara, kompatibilnost inventara, kronološka, tjelesna, taksonomska, logička, analitička i lingvistička kompatibilnost) kako bi se utvrdilo kako se iskustvo zbilje našeg stvarnog svijeta odražava u fikcionalnim svjetovima. Ryan također nudi drugu tipologiju, tj. unutarnju strukturu fiktivnog svijeta (svjetovi znanja, svjetovi namjere, svjetovi želja, svjetovi dužnosti, fantastični svjetovi) kako bi pokazala kako različite koncepcije svijeta kod likova definiraju i stvaraju pripovjednu strukturu fikcije. Osnovna je teza ovog rada da promjena medija – u ovom slučaju iz drame u film – rezultira određenim promjenama projekcije mogućih svjetova, budući da verbalnost i vizualnost dovode do nekih razlika u smislu načina percepcije. U radu se također raspravlja o značaju prostorno-vremenskog opsega, koji je ograničen u slučaju drame, žanra često namijenjenog izvedbi, dok je u filmu redatelj u mogućnosti prema potrebi proširiti taj opseg.

Ključne riječi: Sam Shepard, *Lud od ljubavi*, Robert Altman, Marie-Laure Ryan, prilagodba, naratologija, mogući svjetovi