ATLANTIS PRESS

Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, volume 171

International Conference on Art Studies: Science, Experience, Education (ICASSEE 2017)

Narrative Approach to *Henry V* (Branagh, 1989)

Min Jiao
Faculty of English Language and Culture
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies
Guangzhou, China

***Abstract*—This paper approaches the film *Henry V* (Branagh, 1989) from a narrative perspective. By comparing the literary text of Shakespeare with Branagh's film representation in terms of narrative order and descriptive difference, it argues that Branagh's twisting of narrative order together with the inherently more committal feature of film description contribute to the popular interpretation of the film as denouncing a Machiavellian Monster embarking on his rise with foul witchcraft out of the originally ambiguous play text. Furthermore, it tends to argue that ambiguity or ambivalence is rendered less likely in visual description, hence, in a predominantly visual age, the changing cognitive environment necessitates a re-examination of the theory of Subversion and Containment.**

Keywords—Henry V; Branagh; film narrative; Greenblatt

I. INTRODUCTION

For most literary critics before the 80s of the last century, consensus seems to have been reached about Shakespeare' s *Henry V* — that the play is at its heart a paean to Henry V, the mirror of all Christian monarch, despite the representations of various subversive voices in the original play. This interpretation is enhanced by Lawrence Oliver's 1944 film *Henry V*, in which Lawrence himself acted as Henry V. With glittering and dazzling amours and magnificent rhetorics, this "war-propagandist" Henry V became a national hero, and the film itself came to be considered as helping to consolidate British national solidarity. However, a careful reading of the play would allow readers to locate various subversive voices, for instance, the traitors' execution, the argument between Welsh and Scottish generals about war tactics, and even worse, the hanging of Prince Hal's old acquaintance of the Eastcheap. Above all, the question posed by a common soldier on the eve of the Agincourt Battle lurks and looms: What if the King's cause is not just?

WILLIAMS But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place;' (Shakespeare, IV.1.131-134)

The subversive voice "the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make" cast heavy shadows upon Kingship and Wars, yet the subversion is obliterated by most critical readings of the play. Why? Greenblatt argues that the subversive doubt the play continually awakens serve paradoxically to intensify the power of the king and his war, and:

> … we locate as 'subversive' in the past precisely those things that are not subversive to ourselves, that pose no threat to the order by which we live and allocate resources:… that is, our own values are sufficiently strong for us to contain almost effortlessly alien forces. … There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us. (Greenblatt , 28-29)

According to Greeenblatt, the inherently subversive elements of the play are deferred from readers' cognition until the moment they become no longer subversive. However, by the late 80s, there is the growing contention that the play exalts a Machiavellian conqueror in a rapacious, and, after all, senseless war. This partly leads to Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film *Henry V*. In it, the dark and bloody scenes, the wizard-like smile of the King, and the manipulating tactics he exhibits are brought to the forefront by the director and actor Kenneth Branagh. What Greenblatt termed as the un-noticeable is successfully manifested in the film. Not only Kingship is challenged, but also perspectives towards war are unsettled.

What accounts for this successful representation which renders possible the alert reading of the subversive elements in the film? It is true that Branagh's use of dark colors and close-ups effected the interpretation of a Machiavellian monarch who, for his own impulsive cause, waged an army deep down into the French territory only to escape narrowly from a full destruction by a much better equipped and supplied French Army. It is the purpose of this paper, by comparing the literary text of Shakespeare and Branagh's film representation in terms of narrative order and descriptive difference to disclose that Branagh's twisting of narrative order together with the inherently more committal feature of film description contribute to the popular interpretation of the film as denouncing a Machiavellian Monster embarking on his rise with foul witchcraft out of the originally ambiguous play text. Furthermore, it tends to argue that ambiguity or ambivalence is rendered less likely in visual description. Hence, in a predominantly visual age, the changing cognitive environment necessitate a re-examination of the theory of Subversion and Containment.

II. FROM STORY TO NARRATIVE

Roland Bathe points out two ways of connecting narrative units, namely linear and causality in A Guide to the

Copyright © 2017, the Authors. Published by Atlantis Press.
This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Structure Analysis of Narrative Works. Pierre Sorlin furthers the concept by adding one more way, that is, contingency — no cause-effect relationship or linear relationship between the adjoining narrative units. However, Chatman is rather reserved towards the concept of "contingency" which, in his opinion, fails to recognize readers' powerful tendency to connect the most divergent events:

…since Aristotle, that events in narratives are radically correlative, enchaining. Their sequence, runs the traditional argument, is not simply linear but causative. The causation may be overt, that is, explicit, or covert, implicit". (Chatman, 1977)

He quoted E.M. Forster's example "The king died and then the queen died of grief" which suggests strong causation. Yet "The king died and then the queen died." appears to be linear but in reality indicates causal link as "our minds inveterately seek structure, and they will provide it if necessary. … we are inherently disposed to turn raw sensation into perception." It is his opinion that pure "chronicle" is difficult to achieve:

… The King died and then the queen died differ narratively only in degrees of explicitness at the surface level; At the deeper structural level the causal element is present in both. (Chatman, 1977)

In film narrative, the film text may be constructed in accordance with the linear development of the play text, or may, to some extent, violate its linearity. The violation suggests the uniqueness of the film narrative as compared with the play narrative to the effect of twisting the implicit causal relationship of the story.

Chatman also relates the differences between literary texts description and visual description: literary text is less committal as it cannot exact all the details in words, hence vaguer and requires more the capacity of the readers to construct mental imagery out of words:

"It is well known that readers differ in their capacity or desire to construct mental imagery out of words. And even the most enthusiastic imager probably does not keep an unchanging mental portrait in constant focus as he plows through a novel. Conversely, literary narrative has a kind of power over visual details that is not enjoyed by the cinema. That is the power of noncommitment.…A film rendition would have to add descriptive details". (Chatman 1990, 40-41)

The following section divides the film text into paragraphs based on action fulfillment and space transition to prepare for the analysis of the linear sequence of the film as well as film description in comparison with literary description.

III. NARRATIVE SEQUENCE

A. Before the War

- The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely discuss supporting the war against France in exchange for putting aside a Bill intending to confiscate Church Property.
- King Henry discusses the possible war with France with his ministers, and consults the Salic law with the Bishops demanding answer as to his legitimacy to the French crown.
- King Henry meets the French Ambassador, and is insulted by the gift tennis balls. The meeting ends with Henry's exclamation "We will bend France to our will".
- Bardolph helps to make peace between Nym and Pistol.
- Traitors (Cambridge, Grey, Scroop) are executed.
- Falstaff died, and the mourning of the Eastcheap tavern companions (without Henry) is followed by their immediate departure for France.
- English Ambassador is sent to claim the French crown.

B. During the War

- Henry's speech at Harfleur urges his soldiers to war with courage and bravery.
- Discord among high-ranking officers (Captain Fluellen and Captain Macmorris).
- Harfleur governor submits.
- Katherine, the French princess, learns English.
- French King and Dauphin discuss war with their followers and send an ambassador to show contempt for England.
- Bardolph is executed for theft to discipline English soldiers.
- King Harry tells the French ambassador that England will not seek a battle, yet England will not shun it.
- Strain arises between Dauphin and the Constable
- The English camps at Agincourt, and Henry visits camp by camp to boost morale.
- French side continues to show contempts towards Henry's Army.
- King Henry delivers the famous Agincourt Address.
- Henry orders the killing of prisoners in revenge for French armies' killing of the luggage boys of the English side.
- French ambassador Montjoy comes to surrender;

C. After the War

- Fluellen calls Henry his countrymen.
- Number counting of deaths, burial of the dead.

- Peace-negotiation.
- Henry V Woos Katherine the Princess.
- Henry V dies; Henry VI is enthroned, but is a weak King.

IV. NARRATIVE ORDER

Apparently, the first three narrative units in both the play text and the film text are explicitly linear, with one succeeding another, and the space moving from the ante chamber to the chamber where the King meets his ministers and the French ambassador. However, closer observation discloses the change of sequence in the film text — the discussion of the war against France with the Ministers proceeds the meeting with the French ambassador instead of otherwise. This change of sequence undercut the strong causal connection between French ambassador's insults and Henry's determination to wage a war on France. The play text suggests that Henry is plotted by his bishops to start the war, and his determination is forged by the insult of the French ambassador, consequently, the king is portrayed as innocent, and the war against France is more or less an act of impulse, urged by the arrogant Dauphin and his rude ambassador. By contrast, the reversal of the two sequences—Henry consulting his ministers takes place ahead of receiving the French ambassador, reverses the cause of the war. Namely, Henry already decides on a War against France, and the French ambassador's insult is only a convenience for Henry to have the voices against the war died down. The change of linear order distorts the causal relationship of the play text and renders a different story, a different King out of the original ambivalent play text. Instead of portraying an (at least apparently) innocent King, a sophisticated and manipulative King who is rather sharp to notice the schemes and controversies of his subjects, and capable of manipulating them to his own ends is represented. And this manipulative King image will be heavily challenged by the soldier Williams' query — "What if the King's cause is not just"?

V. VISUAL DESCRIPTION

Then, the succeeding narrative units "Before the War" in terms of narrative order is characterized by spatial transition, with the camera shifting from East Tavern to the English Court, and back to the Tavern Scene of Falstaff's death, and then to Henry V receiving French ambassador's declaration of war, and finally to the French camp where discords are rising. The spacial change suggests the scale and degree of involvement of the war, and how all walks of life are influenced by this war, as well as the contentions and discords on all levels. So far, the film construction seems to be in accordance with the play text construction. However, the addition of a descriptive pause or a flashback, that is, Bardolph's recollection of the good old days at Eastcheap that they had with the then Prince Hal, unsettles the play text — The play text focuses more on Henry's capacity to resolve differences with determination and tacts; Whereas in the film, this determination and tact come to be viewed as cold-bloodedness and cruelty when the good merry days at Eastcheap is highlighted. The ensuing question among the audience is that, would Harry abandon his current followers as he abandoned Falstaff like disposing of a used piece of cloth. After all, who could be closer to Prince Hal in Eastcheap days than Falstaff? The addition of the scene constructs an irony to satirize the grand narrative, and furthers an image of a sophisticate, manipulative and pragmatic monarch pursuing his end with whatever means.

The war scenes in the play text is almost identical in terms of narrative order, narrative units are connected via sequence, with space shifted from the English Camp to the French camp interchangeably, interluded by quarrels and arguments in both camps as well as the English-learning episode of the Princess. What distinguishes the play text from the film text is the inherent difference between literary description and visual description. The gloomy atmosphere, the close ups featuring the casualties, the bloodiness of war and the King cast heavy shadow upon Kingship and War. The inherent vagueness of literary description summons readers' imagination which is manifested by the prologue of the play: "Let us ciphers to this great account, On your imaginary forces work"; Whereas in visual representation, the director has more commitment to render possible the visual representation, and his imagination is directly responsible for the ciphering of the play out of the ambiguity of the play text.

VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Branagh's manipulation of the narrative sequence twists the implied causal relationship as suggested by the play, consequently constructs a Machiavellian monarch on the screen against the ambivalent original play text. Also, the inherently more committal feature of film representation contribute to the popular interpretation of the film as denouncing a Machiavellian Monster embarking on his rise with foul witchcraft out of the originally ambiguous play text.

What's more, the film representation, on the other hand, unsettles the concept of Monarch and Kingship, and is also disturbing for the then British society. Reviews and criticisms of the film frequently relates the film with the rule of Prime Minister Thatcher and the senseless war in Falkland Islands war where "Two bald men fighting over a comb." From this perspective, the film itself becomes subversive for contemporary political situation, as the reception of the film arouses discussion of war and the role of government.

Consequently, Greenblatt's theory of subversion and containment, and the most frequently quoted line from "Invisible Bullets"—"Subversion, endless subversion, only not for us." come to be challenged by intellectuals' interpretations of the film. For Greenblatt, the subversive element in a cultural text is deferring and deferring, but he fails to quantify for whom or until when the deferring would be terminated, hence seems to be rather dogmatic, without considering the changing cognitive environment as well stratifying readers/audience responses. There occurs the danger of dictating individual experiences and cognitions. In a predominantly visual age, when ambiguity or ambivalence

is rendered less likely by visual presentations, the necessity to re-examine the theory of Subversion and Containment arises.

REFERENCES

[1] Henry V. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. BBC Films & Renaissance Films, 1989. Youku. WEB.

[2] Henry V. Dir. Sir. Olivier, Lawrence. Two Cities Films, 1944. Funshion TV. WEB.

[3] Shakespeare, William. “King Henry V.” The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works. Proudfoot, Richard, Thompson, Ann and Kastan, David Scott eds., London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2011, pp.429-462

[4] Greenblatt, Stephen. “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance authority and its subversion, Henry IV and Henry V.” Political Shakespeare. Ed. Dollimore, Jonathan and Sinfield, Alan. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994. P. 18-47

[5] Barthes, Roland, and L. Duisit. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." New Literary History 6.2(1975):237-272.

[6] Sorlin, Pierre, Sociologie du cinema, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1977.

[7] Chatman, Seymour. Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1978.

[8] Chatman, Seymour. Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990.