Madame Bovary goes to Hollywood : De te fabula narratur

The film Madame Bovary, produced in 1949 and directed by Vincente Minnelli has a particularity. It proposes to the spectator to observe and judge, on the basis of his/her own experience, the personal life of Emma. The use of this device indicates the transformation of the initial sense of the story and of the interpretation of Emma's behavior by the spectator due to the importation of the novel in the American culture of the 40's. A comparison of the American production with the French production of 1934, directed by Jean Renoir, will help to get a better understanding of this transformation.

1. The anchoring of the story in the reality

The two productions promote this anchoring of Emma’s story in the real word:

— Renoir’s film does it through outside shootings of Normandie’s landscape, a precise description of the geographical surroundings and by a special attention to sociological details especially on the organisation of rural labour, with the famous scene (quoted by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet in their Cezanne) of the medal of honor given to the old farm employee, a woman whose body bears the traces of hard manual work.

— Minnelli’s film through the reconstitution of the 1857’s trial, the staging of Gustave Flaubert (impersonated by James Mason) as the narrator of the story and a special care to the historical quality of the costumes and the settings

The two films certify to the audience their research of authenticity in the description of a woman’s life, in the double sense of the respect of the text of the novel, and of their effort to clear the personal motivations and the role played by the social context in Emma’s choices of life. But the two films differ because they bear the marks of the cultural environment and of the technical context in which they have been produced.

2. The effects of the context of production

Renoir’s film is produced in the political context of the Third French Republic, with the radicalization of the public opinion and the diffusion of the marxist vision of classes in the Parisian intelligentsia and the technical context of the independant production. This technical context offers the possibility to the director to write the scenario of the film and to control the final cut but deprives him of the actors’troupe employed by the American studio. Furthermore, it exposes the film to be cut to fit with the format imposed by the movie theatres.

As a respect to the author, Renoir’s film is very faithfull to Flaubert’s novel, and to the description it gave of the human geography, the social structure and the forms of sociability of a French rural province at the beginning of the 19th century. It is close to the classical ethnographical description, called « integrative » by the specialists of the history of social sciences. This kind of description proposes to the reader to understand a personal conduct by the integration of the individual in a social formation whose norms enlight the tensions felt by the people accomplishing prohibited acts and the moral reprobation of their behavior.

Minnelli’s film is produced in the economical context of a prosperous North America, recognized since WW2 as the leader of the Free World and as a weathy and modern nation in which a lot of women have got, thanks to the war effort, a social promotion and won their independance. The film indicates itself as a quality product of the most sophisticated Major,
MGM, and presents the trademarks of the studio system: the rewriting of the story by a specialist, the physical resources brought by the troupe of MGM stars, the talented costume-designer (Plunkett), the famous musical score writer, etc. If we can ironize on the historical fantasy (especially in the scene of the wedding, a mixture of Flemish painting’s banquet and cowboys’saloon fight) and of the liberty taken with the historiographical truth (Flaubert, of course, never had to respond to an inculpation and let his lawyer argue on his behalf in front of the court), the film associates the love story with a sociological discourse on marriage and on the fortune and misfortune of the married women. It shows the spectator (as Flaubert’s lawyer in front of the judges) the link between love stories reading and Emma’s romantic aspiration of the “true love”. In doing so, it involves the spectator in the situation, inviting him/her to verify the efficiency of cultural industry on his own sensitivity and to assert its responsibility in the research of love inside marriage. The author expresses, through the narrator, the posture of the ethnologist presenting a testimony on a woman’s private life that illustrates the disability of the passionate girl in a traditional society, which deprives her of her independance and keeps her prisoner of her marriage. The film suggested a kind of ethnographical description different from the one suggested by Renoir’s film. It’s the « narrative » type of ethnographical description, based on life-writing of the people observed by the inquirer, that is staged by the film.

Thus, the comparison between the two productions reveal variations in the form of the adaptation — the building of an objective point of view on Emma’s fate in Renoir’s film opposed to the subjective’s point of view chosen by Minelli — variations related to:

- the roots of the initial novel in a National culture and the inscription of the action depicted by Flaubert in a precise period of the history of sexuality (based in France on the generalization of the Code Civil napoléonien)
- the work of visual translation and the effort to link the situations staged by the film with the contemporary experience and personal concerns of the spectators.
- the effort of “sociological translation”, the mobilization of the ordinary sense of justice of the spectators, whose personal experience of the arrangement between sexes is used to make them feel the injustice done to Emma.

3. « Movie quality »

This observation clears up the difference of quality between the two movies asserted by the critics. French and American Movie Guides agree on the superiority of Minelli’s film (2 TT against 1 T in the Guide de Télérama, 3 stars 1/2 against 2 stars for the Leonard Maltin’s Movie Guide). The two guides celebrate Vincente Minnelli for his ability to stage a very touching female personality, and suggest that Renoir didn’t succeed in this task. The Guide de Télérama gives confirmation — by informing us that « Renoir’s movie features, as a female star, the lover of the producer, Gaston Gallimard (Valentine Tessier) » — of the main limit of the interpretation according to the American critic, the fact that « Tessier is miscast as Emma Bovary ». For the French, Renoir’s movie, even if « mutilated when released » (the original version was 3 hours long, as noticed by the two guides), still keeps a certain value because of « the crude portrait of the provincial French bourgeoisie » and of the skill of a part of the cast (Max Dearly, Pierre Renoir) « trained at the school of the theatrical stage ». As a main criticism, Americans reproach Renoir with the inability of his movie to picture the « romantic, ill-fated title character ». This characterization confirms the human interest of the audience for the theme of the movie, their sensitivity to the unhappy condition of the woman prisoner of a marriage and of a husband that can’t satisfy her own seek of happiness.

This human interest was already at the principle of the diffusion of the novel in the
anglosaxon world. The first translator was Eleanor Marx-Aveling, who translated also Doll House of Henryk Ibsen. For her, Emma Bovary was, like Nora in Ibsen’s drama, the type of the independent young woman whose personality is misunderstood by the selfish men who love her.

This interest is also the motive of its adaptation by Hollywood. Madame Bovary is indeed what was called, at the time of the studios, a «woman’s film». The attention brought by the audience to the arrangement between sexes inside a couple contributed therefore to the success won by the movie. It fitted particularly the personal experience of the audience in a context where the women had, since the 20’s slowly won their independence by escaping the sexual division of work and got the right to seek their sexual and sentimental satisfaction in marriage.

4. Links between narration and ethics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FLAUBERT</th>
<th>RENOIR</th>
<th>MINNELLI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMMA</strong></td>
<td>Emma’s «lust for love »: unjustified, as true love is a product of the mind and a social construction</td>
<td>Emma’s «lust for love »: justified, but vain (one cannot escape from his own world; her local «country club» doesn't include true love)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NARRATIVE &amp; MORAL POINT OF VIEW</strong></td>
<td>The Norman microcosm is depicted from the outside (olympian point of view, all-knowing author who admits of no excuse but the silliness of the entire 19th century)</td>
<td>The Norman microcosm is depicted from the inside, by an anthropomorphised witness (common point of view; excuses are found; fatality is acknowledged)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TAGLINE</strong></td>
<td>Sad ending due to silliness of times</td>
<td>Sad ending due to fatality, contingency, innate dispositions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MISE EN SCENE</strong></td>
<td>Description (eventually «kino-eye» description) already is moral assessment</td>
<td>Simultaneity conducts mise-en-scène. Depth of field used in order to show what occurs</td>
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5. Image of the woman

We can therefore observe two different images of the woman given by the two movies.

Valentine Tessier impersons a social role, the petite-bourgeoise woman lost by her coquetry and her snobism. The spectator sympathizes with the woman trapped by her social environment, whose self-punishment is without proportion with her deeds, a woman victim, at the end, of the bourgeois hypocrisy and of the domination of the men on women described by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, of the Private Property and of the State.*

Jennifer Jones embodies a young person, fresh, emotive, sincere, delicate — « illogical and complex » according to Telerama — who gives herself totally, passionately, to love affairs with men too weak or too cynical to share her passion and stand the relation. She suffers from the condition of the married woman in a world where she cannot divorce, and experience the « difficulty of love ». By putting it this way, the character acquires a psychological consistancy and, through the bodily involvement of Jennifer Jones, is perceived in a familiar way by the spectator, man or woman. This helps to provoke a feeling of proximity with Emma’s conduct, whose modernity is authentified by her teen-ager’s bedroom with the walls decorated by the testimonies of her fandom. Thus, rather than to feel compassion for the pitiful destiny of Emma Bovary, the audience will sympathize with the affective confusion of a modern woman.

PICTURES

1. RENOIR

« Getting close to nature »

Renoir places himself under the realm of naturalism

*Left* : Emma writes to her lover Rodolphe

*Right* : *L’Enfant au Toton*, par Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1737, Louvre), master of still life and one of the greatest artists of the eighteenth century. « His love of truth and nature
endeared him to advanced thinkers in France, the *encyclopédistes* in Denis Diderot's circle. Detecting a moral value in Chardin that was lacking in Boucher, Diderot became his chief intellectual supporter. "It is the business of art," he argued in 1765, "to touch and to move, and to do this by getting close to nature."»

**Depth of field & simultaneity**

*Left*: forge & blacksmith, Charles Bovary on a horse, Yonville, forests  
*Right*: a drawing by Emma, Emma, Charles waiting, houses across the street

**Lock-out & inaccessibility**

*Left*: first and last shots of the ‘high society ball’ sequence: the camera stays behind the grating  
*Right*: Emma lies in bed with Léon in Rouen; the camera begins to track-in, but the window remains closed, and the track stops.
2. MINNELLI

« I want more »

As the ferocious Johnny Rocco in John Huston’s *Key Largo*, keeps saying « I want more! », Emma continuously looks away: for her, « excitement is only found in the faraway » (Flaubert’s voice over.

**Left**: there is more than one apple in the fruit-dish (Charles will not be enough)

**Right**: numerous shots show Emma looking through a window, even when she just received what she wanted

### Male signals, 1 : animals

**Left**: Charles in his very own element: pigs between hay and muck.

**Right**: eyeline matching with the handsome Rodolphe as a stag (half lonesome, half polygamous)

But Emma doesn’t know how to read these signs. « She believed in Cinderella, and now in Charles Bovary. Emma, you cannot know he’s not Prince Charming. He’s only a man » (Flaubert’s voice over; in fact he’s a peasant. Emma is « the peasant’s wife », will say some noble dancer during the high society ball).
Male signals, 2 : in connivance with the viewer

**Left** : diamond-shaped mise-en-scène : Leon is the real focus, as the future lover

**Right** : beginning of the evening night, opening of the lovers’ nest : a cut-away shows a hand everybody thinks to be the husband’s hand. But this is Leon’s hand, still as future lover.

The double life, 1 : separation

« One kind of dream, and an other kind of life » (Flaubert’s voice over) : Emma’s life « à la Pessoa » (« Temos todos duas vidas ») :

**Left** : true life (according to Pessoa) = dreaming : « A verdadeira, que é a que sonhamos na infância,/E que continuamos sonhando, adultos num substrato de névoa » (« She lived in a world of books » : Flaubert’s voice over. The first time she saw the little house Charles has bought, she says : « Oh it’s like a picture in a story book ! »).

**Right** : wrong life (still according to Pessoa) = working, eating, breathing, dying : « A falsa, que é a que vivemos em convivência com outros,/Que é a prática, a útil,/Aquela em que acabam por nos meter num caixão. » (Pessoa (Álvaro de Campos) : Dactilografia)
The double life, 2 : cohabitation

**Left** : Emma puts flowers on the kitchen table, but the bunch is too close, and the flowers become fluzzy. On the contrary, kitchen and outside nature remain perfectly in focus.

**Right** : When she asks Charles for a child, images of romances still are on the wall (« Ridiculous dreams of high romance and impossible love » (Flaubert’s voice over).

The double life, 3 : confusion

« In Emma there was a terrifying capacity for pursuing the impossible. The dream did not end » (Flaubert’s voice over).

A few days before the end, Emma dances alone in her sad little hotel room in Rouen.

« I'm nothing.
I'll always be nothing.
I can't wish to be anything.
Apart from that, I hold inside myself all the dreams of the world. »

Pessoa (Álvaro de Campos) : 'The Tobacco Shop' ('Tabacaria')