



JACLR

*Journal of Artistic
Creation & Literary
Research*

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 7 Issue 1 (June 2019) Article 9

María Pérez Delgado

"The Route from Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream* to Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*"

Recommended Citation

Pérez Delgado, María. "The Route from Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream* to Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 7.1 (2019): 93-102.

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

©Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

Abstract: This article intends to illustrate Darren Aronofsky's recasting of several key aspects of Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream* into the language of film, including its echoes to a particular work, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, which resonate as well through the director's take on the character's road to damnation. In the hopes of fulfilling an American Dream turned to Nightmare, the novel and the film reverse the course of Dante's quest, as the promised paradise of drug abuse becomes the beginning of a journey spiraling downwards into addiction, isolation and suffering.

Keywords: Aronofsky, Selby, Dante, adaptation, intertextuality, film studies.

María PÉREZ DELGADO

The Route from Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream* to Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*

0. Introduction: On the journey from word to image

The adaptation of a literary work to the screen is always a difficult way to go, in which the question of fidelity is always present. On January 29th, 2009, the Spanish diary *El País* published an article by Isabel Lafont concerning the adaptation of novels to cinema. The article debated the opinion of various directors and writers on the way a novel adaptation should be done, should it have to be done at all (Lafont).

The stances featured on the article, quite representative of the concerns that usually surround the debate of adaptation, range from that of authors such as Antonio Muñoz Molina, who claims that there is nothing intrinsically difficult in the process of adaptation of a novel into a film since the only requisite is talent —proposing John Huston and his films *The Dead* (1987) or *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) as an example (Molina qtd. in Lafont)— to the position of other authors like Javier Marías, known for *A Heart So White* (1992) or *When I Was Mortal* (1996), who deem their novels by the problematic term *unfilmable*. In Marías' specific case, the author claimed that his novels are not suitable for the screen because in them the narrative voice is as important as the story or plot, and it would be impossible for film to make them justice, his main complain being the impoverishment that the shortening of a work entails (Marias qtd. in Lafont). As Bluestone so neatly put it, "where the novel entices, the film ravages" (172).

The article also offers the insight of the film directors in charge of novel adaptations, and it is not surprising to find that they are slightly skeptical as to when fidelity ends and interpretation begins (Lafont). They all agree in the necessary dividing line between the author and the screenwriter. For instance, Álex de la Iglesia affirms that in order to create a successful adaptation, one must always avoid contact with the author (qtd. in Lafont). Explaining that at first it is easy to venerate the novel in the conception of an adaptation, the Spanish filmmaker asserts that to make the film one has to evolve into a second phase that involves losing all respect for the work, as if the novel no longer existed, having freedom in its stead (De la Iglesia qtd. in Lafont). Regarding the, some might say, impertinence of de la Iglesia's affirmation, Vicente Aranda comments that fidelity is a really arguable concept and points towards the change of medium for his justification: one must betray the novel in order to stay loyal given that the novel is written under different coordinates (qtd. in Lafont).

However, there seems to be an agreement as to the acceptance of changes if, and only if, the essence (moral, personal perspective of the characters, philosophy of the story) of the film is depicted unswervingly, in spite of all the necessary changes occurred. Necessary because, as Pereira notes, what is written in a paragraph can be translated into ten scenes or not be translated at all (qtd. in Lafont). There is not as much freedom as the written word allows and sometimes the structure of a novel or the treatment of the characters are just ineffective on the screen (Planell qtd. in Lafont). But the Argentinean writer, Guillermo Martínez, is called to offer a positive note, as in his view there is one thing gained throughout the journey from novel to film: where the author must take an effort to introduce the characters, it only takes the filmmaker to place a camera and film (qtd. in Lafont).

And, as this article will illustrate, this happens to be the case with *Requiem for a Dream*. In his article "The problem of the filmed novel", published in *The Quarterly of Film, Radio, and TV* in 1956, George Bluestone cites William Goldwyn on the matter of the adaptability of novels. Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream* could perfectly be one of the novels Goldwyn referred to when he asserted that "some novels read like scenarios" (qtd. in Bluestone 175). *Requiem for a Dream's* use of punctuation, short paragraphs and multiple perspective function as stage directions do in dramas. Darren Aronofsky, who had shyly

walked the paths of adaptation just once before during his formative years in filmmaking,¹ makes the most of the advantage of cinema that Martínez points out and creates a film that is able to convey Selby's message in a more empathic or, rather, somatic way, helped in part by the experimental nature of drugs that the film represents.

This affinity between film and novel is of such intensity that not only preserves the core of Selby's narrative and message, it translates into the film the intertext articulated in Selby's work. This article intends to illustrate Aronofsky's recasting of several key aspects of Selby's novel into the language of film, including its echoes to a particular work, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, which resonate as well through the director's take on the character's road to damnation. In the hopes of fulfilling an American Dream turned to Nightmare, the novel and the film reverse the course of Dante's quest, as the promised paradise of drug abuse becomes the beginning of a journey spiraling downwards into addiction, isolation and suffering.

1. On the Way: Harmonising Dante, Drugs and (American) Dreams.

Rhythm is, in its most general sense, defined as an ordered alternation of contrasting elements. Usually among those elements there is a need for distance, to mark the order of the elements, there is a need for time, to carry about the coordination of such, and lastly, there is a need for an agent that carries about the execution of the rhythm. Interestingly enough, according to John Dewey, rhythm, and therefore all the elements comprised in and involved with rhythm, are necessary to enable artistic creation (Laine 49). Those are also elements that constitute a *sine qua non* for any particular journey.

Journeying through three different seasons —summer, fall and winter— the story gradually unveils and helps to understand the "four individuals that pursued the American Dream" through a difficult process of personal change and development into a helpless addiction. The way each section combines or *alternates* the elements mentioned above, distance, agents and rhythm, helps conveying the empathic or somatic experience that I mentioned in the introduction. These seasons, however, are not used for the novel's structuring, even though seasons are marked in the text. Thus, it constitutes the device used by Darronofsky to conform the tripartite structure that would equate the *Comedy's* division into "Paradiso", "Purgatorio" and "Inferno", as the subsequent analysis will illustrate.

The film starts with a scene of the show of Tappy Tibbons to be interrupted by Harry Goldfarb stealing his mother's TV set in order to pawn it to get "cop money" (00:00:54-00:01:16). Already from these scenes and from the beginning of the first part, "Summer" (00:05:37), until almost the end of the section, a special glow can be noticed in the scenes, a sort of muted, dreamlike brilliance that somewhat suggest a paradise: weather is excellent, colours are soft and bright; it is a stage of bliss.

Every character, Sara, Harry and Marion and Tyrone, through their addictions to heroin, cocaine, food or TV visualise the ethereal world that would come true once their dreams are realised, an idea that can be traced through the scenes that end up with a fade

¹ Aronofsky directed *Fortune Cookie* (1991), one of his first movies also based on the homonymous novel by Hubert Selby Jr.

to white. This technique, used recurrently during this first part, somehow insinuates a degree of internal peace or relief felt after moments of intense euphoria. Among these, Harry and Marion have already decided to pursue their dream of running a clothes store (00:18:23), Marion feels relieved after having gotten off on cocaine (00:19:33) and lifts her arms slowly into the white, Sara and her neighbours feel ecstatic after having placed the application for the TV show into the mailbox (00:22:49) and Harry and Tyrone feel just overjoyed after having copped (and tasted) the “bread” that they are about to “off” (00:25:09).² The white calm offered by these fading screens is always and only interrupted by the artificial time caused by their habits. Although it is true that the first time it is interrupted, it deals with more withdrawal symptoms than addiction—as when Sara is trying to quit junk food (00:18:30 - 00:18:56)— it somehow deals with habit nevertheless. Other interruptions of the fade to white is made by a sequence in which a joint is being prepared by Tyrone (00:22:56) or by Sara’s habit of watching TV, represented in a quick sequence of grabbing the remote and pressing the on/off button (00:19:57; 00:25:10).

This is, however, grounded on the reason that, after having conceived their goals, which will act as the Prime Movers³ of their paradise, and having been called by their respective Beatrice in the realm of dreams, all the character have to get back to the terrestrial world and set to work. The significance of dreams is essential, considering that that Dante also starts his journey after having lost the way by succumbing to a state of somnolence:

Io non so ben ridir com'ì v'intrai,
tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai. (Alighieri “Inf.” I, ll. 10-12)

I cannot tell how exactly I got there,
I was so full of sleep at that point of my journey
When, somehow, I left the proper way. (47)

Nonetheless, for the analogy to be constituted in both texts, the characters still need to find a guide to help them in their way to the *real* paradise, to help them fulfil their dreams. If Beatrice is to be the faithful hope they have towards their opportunities to fulfil their aspirations,⁴ their addiction to cocaine, heroin, marihuana and dextroamphetamines must constitute, symbolically, the figure of Virgil.

In the *Comedy*, the figure of Virgil is in charge, as well as drugs are in *Requiem for a Dream*, to save and guide the protagonist through the alternative path to salvation, vanishing every shadow of doubt that arises in his companion’s mind:

² See appendix.

³ The Prime Mover, or *primum mobile*, constitutes in the *Comedy* the Ninth Circle of Heaven, which sets the motion of all spheres of creation in accordance to God’s Will.

⁴ Hope is the attribute that Beatrice epitomises and one of the three Christian virtues, which is represented by colour green (Alighieri Pur. XXIX, ll. 121-129), the colour of Beatrice’s garments (Alighieri Pur. XXX, l. 32) and eyes (Alighieri Pur. XXXI, ll. 115-116).

Dunque: che è perché, perché restai,
perché tanta viltà nel core allette,
perché ardire e franchezza non hai, (Alighieri Inf. II, ll. 121-126)

What is it then? Why do you dawdle here?
Why do you let such cowardice sleep in your heart
Why have you not more boldness and openness? (55)

In the same way, drugs remind Harry, Tyrone and Marion that everything is possible. What the novel can express with words, "a little taste and everything will be just fine" (Selby 119), the film explains graphically without any need for them. An instance of this, from the same scene as in the novel, is to be found when Harry is leaving his mother's house in a cab and feels enough overwhelmed by his mother's addiction to cry (00:45:14), a scene interrupted by a quick sequence of heroine shooting. Barely six seconds have passed (00:45:20) until Harry seems to feel again, if not all right, at least not overwhelmed. Heroine, then, as Virgil, is in charge of turning the "negative emotions into positive affects" (Laine 55) and help the characters continue pursuing their pilgrimage. However, as Beatrice reminds in "Paradiso", once the characters have made a vow towards their objective, they shall lose all sense of agency and thus be open to, as Laine puts it, "systematic abuse" (Laine 48):

ché, nel fermar tra Dio e l'omo il patto,
vittima fassi di questo tesoro,
tal quale io dico; e fassi col suo atto. (Alighieri Par. V, ll. 28-30.)

Because when the pact is made between God and man,
The treasure which I have shown you the will to be
Is made a sacrifice by its own act. (369)

The characters fall prey of their addictions and lose control within themselves: the distortion of reality grows frequent, but not pleasant anymore. To show this, Selby gets hold of the use of punctuation to distort time, and of descriptions to represent the hallucinations that take place. Aronofsky, however, remains in the preference of the visual influence and makes use of different techniques to represent the effects of the drugs that are consumed. By the end of "Summer", the characters don't feel comfortable anymore with their situation; time-lapses, which used to contribute to self-improvement of the characters and their "well-being" (design production, thorough house-cleaning), at least on the emotional level, now entrap the characters (Sara, no longer able to sit still, is now slave to her forced and quick motion (00:34:23 - 35:39).

It is also the time the first Snorri-Cam is first introduced: a camera device that is rigged to the body of the actor, facing the actor directly, so when they walk, they do not appear to move, but everything around them does (Powell 75). It is used to depict Tyrone

escaping from a shooting (00:46:14) through long corridors that have already granted them access into the Purgatory.



Fig. 1 Snorri-cam attached to Jennifer Connelly (Marion)

Fall is already come and with it the test of endurance, of penitence, that constitute the journey through purgatory. It is *the* necessary step to be able to get to their paradise. As in the *Comedy*, where the exit from hell and the entry to Mount Purgatory is done “per la buca d'un sasso, ch'elli ha roso,” (Alighieri Inf. XXXIV, l. 131) (“Through a hollow in the rock, which it has worn”) (195), the characters of the film must make their way through narrow and small corridors: Marion leaving her shrink’s house (00:58:16 - 00:59:05), Sara leaving his house (01:10:34) or Harry and Tyrone crossing the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge (1:11:17). Quick sequences concerning consumption also come oftener as they get fall deeper and deeper into their addiction, with the effect of accelerating the average rhythm of time, which also implies being closer to fulfil the dream. The downfall starts, however, now that Virgil has changed his presence.

While he is present for Sara more than ever, who has started augmenting her pill doses and whose delirium stops time (01:00:06) and provides her with maddening hallucinations (01:07:41 - 01:10:34), he is seldom there to Sara, Harry and Tyrone, who start experiencing withdrawal symptoms. Accordingly, all the characters withdraw themselves from the rest, too, as they experience their craving from drugs. While the novel offers confessions that hint at that distance, such as “Tyrone was happy and relieved not to have another vein to feed” (205), or depicts Marion independent from Harry, once she entered the sex- for-drugs world (209)—they no longer share: page 206 shows Harry holding “a few bags on Marion”— the film, again, vows for a visual representation of it: Tyrone behind prison bars is thus compelled to be distanced from everything he knows of outside, but also inside. The scene (fig. 2) shows a time-lapse of people moving in the background while he stands still.

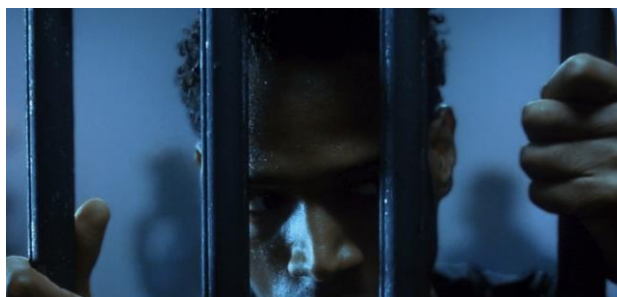


Fig. 2 (*Requiem* 00:48:43)

Fig. 3 (*Requiem* 00:50:29)Fig. 4 (*Requiem* 00:59:43)

The second (fig. 3) and third frame (fig. 4) don't need a split-screen anymore, a technique widely used in the "Summer" section to emphasise the insulation of each character from each other, despite being together, derived from drugs-consumption. In both cases, distance is emphasised by the turning backs (fig. 3) and the small abyss left in the sofa between each other (fig. 4). It seems that the closer they think they are to their objective, the further apart from each other they are. Ultimately, distance will be represented literally with Harry's and Tyrone's travel to Florida in the winter section.

If distance and time were encompassed in a sort of *andante* through summer, and *moderato* through fall, the last events occurred in the autumn, and the use of the soundtrack are going to be performing an intense *presto* that will place them at the gates of their own private hell. In Dante's "Inferno", the words "No room for hope, when you enter this place" welcome the travellers as the sign written above the gate of hell (Alighieri *Inf.* III, l. 9). The characters of *Requiem* take their last chance to achieve their dream —Tyrone and Harry drive to Florida to get drugs, Sara escapes her house harassed by her hallucinations and decides to go to the TV studio offices to plead a position in a show, Marion finally escapes her craving for drugs by calling Big Tim and attends the sex party organised by him— only to find that they have been advancing towards the opposite direction. The reality of this finding is emphasised through a long sequence of quick frames (which occupies almost the half of the "Winter" section), with an ever-increasing speed in the rhythm of both images, changes of perspective (from one character to another) and music. "Lux Aeterna", by Clint Mansell, plays an important role in the conduction of the visual symphony, similar to the interpretation of Jadranka Skorin-Kapov of the movie as visual poem (36) that constitutes *Requiem for a Dream*. In the previous sections it is used with more intensity in events that have to do with escaping: the excitement felt when placing the application in the mailbox in "Summer" might be viewed as an escape from reality, and the escaping is the more obvious at the end of fall and beginning of the winter when Marion and Sara leave their shrink's and their own apartment, respectively.

3. Destination arrived: denouement

In the last section, however, the inability to escape their dream now that they have found it is articulated. As Selby said in an interview with Duncan Elkinson in 2000, "searching for is not as dangerous as finding" that it is fake (Elkinson 4:51-4:54). Equating the American Dream with the devastating effects of cancer, Selby (and Aronofsky) considers it another one of those "obsessions of the mind" (Elkinson 4:56), lining it up with fixations for TV, food or drugs, which, so long as they constitute addiction, are still obsessions. The living portrait of such devastation is to be found in the quiet frames that form the ending of the movie after the intense climax produced by screams (Sara, Harry), distress (Tyrone, Sara, Harry) and emotional tension (Tyrone, Marion), showing all of the characters lying in a fetal position that shows an acceptance of their inability to get to the American Dream. The exception to this impossibility is seen in the case of Marion, who seems to be happy to endure the situation as long as she obtains her drugs (01:32:02) and Sara, who ultimately lives finally her appearance on TV through non-painful hallucinations (fig. 11, 01:32:41-01:33:29). As a final assertion of this fact, the very last scene's use of light will stress again the impossibility to reach a dream, on the one side, and to achieve any sort of reunion (01:33:39), on the other. All of the message conveyed almost without words, or with empty words—it is important to note that the dialogues are not of much importance in the film— and making subtle use of a work like Dante's *Divine Comedy* that, even if unread, still exerts its influence over the narratives of Western culture, Aronofsky's movie defies the "unfilmable" category mentioned in the introduction by literally translating words into images and still be able to transmit with the always-at-stake fidelity, the essence of the novel.

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. *Divine Comedy*. Translated by Charles H. Sisson; edited by David H. Higgins, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- _____. *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, vol. 4, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi, Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1994. *Danteonline*, danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR. Accessed 5 June 2019.
- Bluestone, George. "Word to Image: The problem of the Filmed novel". *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1956, pp. 171-180.
- Lafont, Isabel. "Del libro al cine, un viaje peliagudo." *El País*, 29 Jan. 2009, elpais.com/diario/2009/01/29/cultura/1233183601_850215.html. Accessed 5 June 2019.
- Laine, Tarja. *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*. Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Powell, Anna. *Deleuze, Altered States and Film*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 75-76.
- Requiem for a Dream*. Directed by Darren Aronofsky. Performances by Ellen Burstyn, Jared Leto, Jennifer Connelly and Marlon Wayans. Artisan Entertainment. 2000. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/search?q=req&jbv=60001134&jbp=1&jbr=0. Accessed 5 June, 2019.
- Selby Jr., Hubert. *Requiem for a Dream*. Penguin Classics, 2012.

Skorin-Kapov, Jadranka. "Requiem for a Dream: Addiction and Broken Dreams". *Daniel Aronofsky's films and the fragility of Hope*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, pp. 21-42.

Bioprofile of the author

María Pérez Delgado holds a BA degree in English Studies from the Complutense University of Madrid. During her bachelor studies, she enjoyed an Erasmus grant, selecting as her destination Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in Munich, Germany. She has published an article on Jonathan's Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and has participated as a speaker in the VII International Conference "Espacios míticos: De bestias engendros y otros monstruos innombrables" held at Alcalá de Henares University. Her main field of research is postmodernist literature and British contemporary fiction.

Contact: < mperez26@ucm.es >

Appendix



Fig. 5 (*Requiem* 00:00:54- 00:01:16)



Fig. 6 (*Requiem* 00:05:28)



Fig. 7 (*Requiem* 00:18:23)



Fig. 8 (*Requiem* 00:19:33)



Fig. 9 (*Requiem* 00:22:49)



Fig. 10 (*Requiem* 00:25:09)



Fig. 11 (*Requiem* 01:33:39)