



Session Six of the Club « Culture et politique »

14th March 2023 16:30-18:30

CLSH in Nancy, Room A311, IDEA Research Lab

Presentation by Delphine Rapenne – American Censorship in 1960s Hollywood: Adapting *Breakfast at Tiffany's*

Members present: Mathilde Archen, Elise Dupuy, Claire Langlois, David Papotto, Eleanor Parkin-Coates, Eva Petit, Willis Pinto, Delphine Rapenne, Margot Remy

Absent or Excused : Gnim Abete, Manon Barrett, Célia Chaabane, Clémence Cruzille, Linda Mathlouthi, Emma Nelz

Corpus: novella published in 1958 by Truman Capote + movie by Blake Edwards in 1961

I. The mechanics of adaptation and challenges of adapting the story

Timeline: The book was first serialized in *Esquire* magazine and the movie was released a few years later by Paramount Pictures.

Cast members: Audrey Hepburn, George Peppard, Patricia Neal

The plot of the novella follows Holly, a call girl in her twenties, who develops a relationship with a writer, the narrator of the story. In the book, the narrator has no name but is referred to by Holly as Fred because he resembles her brother Fred. The narrator in the book is homosexual. At the end of the book, which is told at the beginning, Holly fled to America due to criminal charges and the other characters do not know where she is.



The book's plot was very modern for its time: it dealt with the representation of women (a free woman, independent from patriarchy, who does not care for men) which clashed with the expectation of the "Angel of the House" in 1950s America. Also, religious groups, particularly Catholics, were very active at the time and advocated a more conservative way of life. For example, The Catholic Legion of Decency were against the depiction of women that Holly represents. The book itself also deals with prostitution, adultery, crime, homosexuality, and crude language.

This resulted in a push-and-pull situation between two parts of society: religious groups who pushed for the respect of conservative values (marriage, no talking about sex and insults...) and who supported a system of censorship which was embodied by the PCA (Production Code Administration) VS Hollywood and the entertainment industry, which faced increased competition from abroad which was not subjected to a seal of approval and was therefore less regulated, contained cruder language and nudity, and which succeeded in attracting an audience.

The power of The Catholic Legion of Decency has been discussed by researchers such as Gregory Black. 'In July 1934; in less than a year, the church had recruited millions of Americans of all religious denominations to pledge not to attend "immoral" movies' (Black 1989)

The 1960s was a period of change and turmoil: political troubles (Vietnam War, Cold War), the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, the election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the women's liberation movement, the student's movement. It was a pivotal moment in time when conservative values clashed with a demand for change.

The PCA (Production Code Administration) was created in 1934 and provided the seal of approval to film productions until 1968. However, its influence was beginning to diminish in 1961, the year of the release of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Couvares wondered in 2009 if the Production Code 'mattered and in what way? [...] Did the code actually change what appeared on the screen, or was it just a moralistic veil behind which the studios doled out mainstream entertainment with as much titillation as they thought the audience would bear?'

Adaptation theory: the adaptation of the book to the screen. Linda Hutcheon and O'Flynn Siobhan (2013) said that they wanted to 'tackle the denigration of adaptation in our culture that still tends to value the original.'

Research questions: How would you adapt a work that openly deals with female desire, emancipation outside of marriage, homosexuality and crime under the Code while drawing an audience to the theatres?

A clearer storyline for a stronger impact

Hutcheon and O'Flynn: 'Just as there is no such thing as a literal translation, there can be no literal adaptation'. An original story in prose is turned into a visual and is an acted representation on screen. There is also a time constraint that is not present on the book, and commercial aspects are absent from book publishing.

Hutcheon and O'Flynn: 'In the process of dramatization there is inevitably a certain amount of reaccentuation and refocusing of themes, characters and plot'.

Changes made during the adaptation:

Capote's story is not a happy ending, so to better appeal the American public, the ending was changed into a romantic "happy ending": In the novella, Holly is carefree and runs away at the end; in the movie, she is depicted as fragile to gain empathy from the public.

Mr. Yunioshi, in the novella, is a serious character, a photographer who is close to Holly and it is his character who searches for Holly when she flees. In the movie, he is transformed into a comic character and is the butt of 'racial' jokes; he was played by a white actor, Mickey Rooney. This should be considered within the post-WWII context.

The platonic friendship between Holly and Fred was not very bankable, so this was turned into a romantic comedy. The narrator Fred was transformed into Paul Varjak, a heterosexual man who fell in love with Holly.

Also, in the movie, any references to WWII are deleted which renders it more cheerful.

Analysis of a scene



High angle shot, putting the character in a vulnerable position – Holly is singing in a very plain apparel *Moon River* (Johnny Mercer and Henri Mancini's Oscar winning song)

(She does not notice Paul)



As the camera moves closer, we can notice an almost sad expression on her face (we have never seen her like that)

Reception

The movie was successful, grossing 10M\$ for a budget of 2.5M\$. It received good reviews, was nominated for 5 Academy Awards, and won 2 Oscars. This was notably thanks to the cast, but also its portrayal of New York City. The movie also had an impact on modern art, and it was featured in an exhibition at the MoMA on films which represent NYC.

There are important paradoxes to note. There was a strong will to dissociate Holly from Audrey Hepburn at the time, even though now, the two are very associated. They were attempting to dissociate the two figures as Hepburn was seen as elegant and well-brought up, in contrast to the fictional character. No similar statement regarding Paul Varjak was released for him; even though he is a gigolo in the movie, there were no concerns regarding this. Originally, Marilyn Monroe was thought to be a good candidate for Holly's character, but the producers refused.

III. From a commercial success to a Hollywood classic

There was a lot of merchandise for the movie in contrast with the novella, due to the popularity of the movie and the more obvious ways in which merchandise can be created for a movie.

Has the film made into popular culture? Gary L. Harmon synthesized the concept of popular culture in 1983: more formulaic, standardized, mass produced, mainly commercial; standards of excellence not well-defined: success measured by popularity; the purpose is more to entertain than to enlighten, to meet audience needs and desires. This applies more to the movie than the novella.

The film itself was promoted as Audrey Hepburn's movie: she is on the poster in the foreground, and there is only a rainy kiss in the background. Audrey's name is also associated with the word 'icon.' Even with the production of more recent adaptations, Audrey Hepburn remains present, with other actresses constantly being compared to her. She left a strong imprint on the film, even though she was not, in fact, the first representation of Holly (there was one in a magazine).

IV. Conclusion

Breakfast at Tiffany's reveals the constraints that the process of adaptation had to deal with, as well as shedding light on the liberties and the limitations of artistic choices (novella, to script, to film). It is also a significant film which underlines the interactions between the morals of the time and the movie industry in the 1960s regarding women, patriarchy, and sexual emancipation. It illustrates the power of a censorship bureau such as the PCA but also highlights how things were starting to change. Finally, it sheds light on the struggles between a book and a movie in terms of reception, what makes a classic, and how posterity might be influenced by several factors, such as its cast, or its merchandising.



Concluding remarks - a cinematographic adaptation product of its own time

- *BAT* reveals the **constraints** that the process of adaptation had to deal with, as well as sheds light on the **liberties** and the **limitations** of artistic choices (novella – to script – to film)
- a **significant film** that underlines the **interactions** between **morals** and the **movie industry** in the 1960s regarding women, patriarchy, sexual emancipation
- Illustrates the **power of a censorship bureau** such as the PCA but also highlights how things were **starting to change**
- Sheds light on the **struggles** between a book and a movie in terms of **reception**, what makes a **classic**, and how **posterity** might be influenced by several factors (its cast, its merchandising..)

V. Discussion about the study day of the club (June 2024)

David presents three possible axes of research around which the study day could be formed. These include:

- Political influence in audio-visual culture
- Gender studies/feminine identities
- Meeting points between culture and politics: the place of the media.

Each member suggests an axe in which they might be able to situate their own research. Delphine, Eva, and Margot would like their presentations to be a part of Axe 1, as they work

on films and French punk. Emma, Mathilde, and Claire propose presentations within Axe 2, linking literary works to the performing arts. The topics of Willis, Celia and Elise would fit into Axe 3, as each work on different media forms, including newspapers, television, and social media. Clémence's research may also fit into Axe 3 and will need discussing with her.

David and Eleanor suggest that each member provide a title and an abstract before the next club meeting, so that the day can be officially announced and advertised among colleagues and students.

A discussion follows concerning the practical elements of the day: the location, the duration and language of the presentations, the possible invitation of a keynote speaker, the advertisement of the event...

The session concludes with all members satisfied with what is expected of them for the next club session. This session will be led by Mathilde Archen and Emma Nelz, who will present together the following topic: « Relations hétéronormées et performativité du genre dans *Les quatre filles du Dr. March* et *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ». This session will take place in Metz.



Minutes taken by Willis Pinto and proofread by Eleanor Parkin-Coates.