

Storytelling in Fiction and Film: “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” versus *Smoke*

Daniela Tecucianu
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

Abstract

The present paper aims at discussing the ways in which storytelling functions in Paul Auster’s “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” and in its film adaptation, *Smoke*, respectively. The metanarratives in both the short story and the movie alert the reader and the viewer to the dangers of literal interpretation, since art is indisputably different from life, no matter how authentic and real the story it presents might seem.

Keywords

film, metanarrative, short story, storytelling

Storytelling is considered to be a literary device; some claim that there is a certain degree of redundancy concerning storytelling in film, as opposed to fiction. Words have their “telling” power, whereas images have the capacity of “showing”. To what extent can we, therefore, speak about storytelling in film? What are the differences between storytelling in fiction and storytelling in film and what is the common ground between them? It is these particular questions that the current paper addresses; in doing so, it draws on Paul Auster’s “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” and on its adaptation, *Smoke*.

Storytelling represents the act of recounting an event or a series of events which can be either real or fictitious; it is, in other words, what Gerard Genette calls “*narrating*”. He distinguishes between story (“*the totality of the narrated events*”), narrative (“*the discourse, oral or written, that narrates them*”) and narrating [9, 13]. Therefore, story is not the same thing as narrative.

The concept of narrative, introduced by the Tzvetan Todorov, “*expands its language-based, book-supported literary fiction to other disciplines (discourse analysis, history), to other semiotic modes (visual, kinetic, aural) and to other technologies (painting, photography, TV, film)*”. This is what Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan call “*intermedial storytelling*” [10, 1].

There are many voices who claim that, essentially, there is no common ground between literature and the cinematic genre. J. Hillis Miller, for instance, contends that: “*The picture means itself. The sentence means itself. The two can never meet*” [6, 64]. Similarly, Giorgio Bassani states that cinema and literature are “*two fundamentally different media*” [5, 4].

However, Marina Grishakova and Marie-Laure Ryan have an opposing viewpoint; they argue that the concept of fiction has definitely been extended “*beyond its literary homeland*” [5, 1]. As a testimony that verbal and visual representation can co-exist, Claude Gandelman has entitled his book: *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* (1991). In both verbal and visual narratives, there is tension between the iconic and the symbolic components of the medium, between the “performative” (telling), and the “cognitive” (showing) aspects of narration.

As stated above, the verbal and the visual can coexist; nonetheless, telling, i.e. recounting, is different from showing, i.e. imitation, representation. Even though “*every film involves a visual telling of its story*”, “*it is not obvious that this mode of visual telling constitutes a true analogue to narration in literary fiction*”. Nevertheless, movies are the result of editing: previously filmed shots are put together in a “chain”, and this “*gives film an additional discursive character, a character that potentially suffices to establish a dimension of fictive pictorial narration*” [13, 21].

As “*panglobal facts of culture*”, narratives respond to the enduring need to “*humanize time*” and make sense of our temporal experience by structuring it into a comprehensible form. In this sense, both fiction and film are “*arts of narrative action*”, storytelling arts defined by their intrinsic narrativity, that is their ability to shape a mere succession of events into a coherent and meaningful whole [5, 14].

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette asserts that a story can be either told or “*transmitted by an extra-narrative medium*”. Moreover, he argues, “*there is room for two narratologies*”, a “*thematic*” one, meant to analyse the story or the narrative content, and a “*formal*” one, which is to analyse the narrative “*as a mode of ‘representation’ of stories*”. “*The sole specificity of narrative lies in its mode, not in its content, which can equally well accommodate itself to a ‘representation’ that is dramatic, graphic or other*”, he explains [9, 16].

Short stories require a great creative effort of adaptation, since they have to be somehow expanded. This notwithstanding, it is precisely their conciseness and the use of the implicit that favor the possibility of expansion. Short stories become particularly attractive because they presuppose expanding rather than contracting. This was also the case with Paul Auster’s “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story”, first published in 1990, that, no later than 1995, would become *Smoke*, the result of the collaborative creative endeavor of Paul Auster and Wayne Wang.

It is Paul Auster's background that has allowed him to cooperate so well with Wang in their effort of turning "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" into a film. Stephanie Harrison summarizes this perfectly:

Born after World War II, and raised on film and television, Auster represents a new breed of writers whose work reacts, implicitly and explicitly, to media's overwhelming centrifugal force. These are writers actively trying to resolve the intersection between fiction and film (...), who understand, much better than their predecessors, the power of the medium and the shape-shifting nature of stories [11, 559].

"Auggie Wren's Christmas Story", written in the first person singular, begins by clearly stating the fact that the story does not belong to the narrator; he only retells it, and in doing this he claims he is as faithful to the original story as possible: *"I heard this story from Auggie Wren. (...) The whole business about the lost wallet and the blind woman and the Christmas dinner is just as he told it to me"* [1, 578]. This is meant to create the impression of authenticity, to state that what we are about to read is not fiction, but actual experience. It is by means of these warranties of authenticity that the author creates the illusion of truth and manages to engage the reader's active participation.

In what follows, the reader learns about how Paul and Auggie became friends. The narrator is most likely Paul Auster, which means that the story is, to a certain extent, autobiographic. Like the author of the short story himself (whose first name he shares), the narrator is a successful writer; he often goes to the cigar store where Auggie works behind the counter. By confirming his status as a book writer, the narrator maintains the illusion of truth.

Auggie considers himself an artist as well, as Paul concedes: he has been *"photographing time"* for many years, both *"natural time and human time"* [1, 579], by taking a color photo of the exact same view every morning at seven o'clock, irrespective of the season or weather. Although Paul's impression of Auggie's work was that it represented *"the oddest, most bewildering thing"* he had ever seen, *"a numbing onslaught of repetition, the same street and the same buildings over and over again, an unrelenting delirium of redundant images"* [1, 579], he finally has the revelation, the epiphany that it is art, and understands the symbolic value of the photographs. This is, in a nutshell, how the two become friends.

As the story goes on, we find out that the narrator has been commissioned to write a short story that would appear in the *New York Times* on Christmas morning. Nevertheless, he finds it very difficult to write such a story, since, he argues, “*Christmas stories were no more than wish-fulfillment dreams, fairy tales for adults*”; what he really wants is to write “*an unsentimental Christmas story*”, but that is “*a contradiction in terms, an impossibility*” [1, 580]. It is Auggie Wren, however, that saves the day for him and delivers him the story he needs. The same story that Paul Auster will publish as “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” and that will be the source of expansion in *Smoke*. The fact that we are reading the story referred to in the text is meant to be a proof of its veracity.

The story goes as follows: “*one day, in the summer of seventy-two*”, a young man that “*must have been about nineteen or twenty*” came in Auggie’s cigar store and started stealing, taking advantage of the fact that the store was quite crowded. It was not long before Auggie noticed “*what he was up to*” [1, 580-581] and immediately ran after him, without being able to catch him. However, the boy had dropped his wallet along the way and this would trigger an unbelievable chain of events. Feeling rather sorry for the boy, Auggie decided not to call the police and have him arrested; he decided to keep the wallet instead. Months passed by and, at Christmas time, Auggie was alone, “*stuck with nothing to do*” [1, 581]. This is when he decided to go and return the wallet. The address he finds in the wallet turns out to be Granny Ethel’s, who is Robert Godwin’s (the young man’s) grandmother. She is blind and seems to mistake Auggie for Robert: “*I knew you’d come, Robert. I knew you wouldn’t forget your Granny Ethel on Christmas*” [1, 581]. Auggie decides not to tell her the truth and the two spend a wonderful day together. They willingly suspend their disbelief and decide to play a game that will turn out to be a source of happiness, especially for Ethel.

What happens afterwards is “*positively crazy*”, as Auggie himself admits. He goes to the bathroom and sees about seven new cameras there, probably “*the work of the real Robert*”. “*Just like that*” [1, 582], he decides to take one for himself. Granny Ethel has fallen asleep in her chair, so he leaves the house without saying goodbye. The camera Auggie stole from Ethel house is the same camera that he uses every morning for his photographs.

Auggie concludes by asking Paul: “*And now you’ve got your Christmas story, don’t you?*” Although the latter agrees, it is the “wicked grin” spread across Auggie’s face” that makes him doubt the veracity of the story: “*I couldn’t be sure,*

but the look in his eyes at that moment was so mysterious, so fraught with the glow of some inner delight, that it suddenly occurred to me that he had made the whole thing up. (...) I had been tricked into believing him” [1, 583].

The short story belongs to the category of metafiction; what we deal with is a commentary on the art of writing itself. Post-modernist, reflexive, “Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story” is also an example of *mise-en-abyme*. We have a framing and framed narrative which are artfully interwoven in a final story that questions the very limit between truth and fiction. Like Paul, the reader is confused; s/he can no longer tell what is true and what is not.

There are two epiphanic moments throughout the short story; both of them are reactions to aesthetic experiences, suggesting that the story is about receiving. Firstly, the narrator realizes that Auggie is actually photographing time, in other words, he perceives the symbolic value of his photographs. Secondly, after Auggie tells his story, there follows, once again, an aesthetic revelation. Both Paul and the reader have been tricked into believing; for the reader, therefore, Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” has been violated.

The lesson is once again given by Auggie: fiction is not true, it is mere artful invention; the lesson extends to the reader, who also has an epiphanic moment: the uncritical reader can be easily deceived. The critical reader is like Ethel: s/he participates immensely, invests in the game, but only pretends to believe. The success of Grannie’s day is based on investment in illusion – her benefits are proportional to this. The paradox is that, although Grannie is blind, she is able to see into things. Like in *Oedipus the King*, those who have their eyesight are blind to the truth, whereas those who are literally blind can “see” it.

Both the embedded and the embedding story are stories of lying and stealing. The author’s literal gift to the reader – by means of his unconventional Christmas story – is a lesson about art. It alerts the reader to the fiction in fiction, to the dangers of literal, biographical interpretation. Art is different from life, it transforms life. The reader can both participate and distance himself/herself, i.e. play the game willingly, not tricked into it. It will be the task of both the screenwriter (who is also the writer of the short story, namely Paul Auster) and the director to adapt the source text in such a way that, this time, it alerts the viewer to the same dangers.

The film is explicitly divided into five parts. The prologue and the epilogue are very similar to the short story; the explicit short story, however, is a minimal portion of the film. Harvey Keitel, who plays the role of Auggie Wren, brilliantly tells the story

Auggie shares with Paul in the source text, *ad litteram*, with the same “wicked grin spread across his face” at the end. The following sentence in the short story: “I began to study them as if I would imagine stories for them” [1, 579] is the basis for the expansion in the film. The added characters have an ambiguous status: they are most likely a figment of Paul Benjamin’s (also a character in the movie) imagination. It is noteworthy that Auster’s full name is Paul Benjamin Auster. Therefore, the film resorts to the same artifice as the short story: they both maintain the illusion of truth by means of the protagonist’s name. Moreover, they are both metafictional.

Whenever a new character is introduced in the movie, we see Paul typing; this is always preceded by a *fade in* and a *fade out*. Since he types in the diegesis of film, he is maybe typing the story of Rashid, Ruby, Cyrus. This is actually the way in which metatextuality is rendered in the film, an equivalent of the *mise-en-abyme* technique encountered in the short story.

There is little camera movement; the film is not an action film, but a film for reflection. Long shots and sequence shots prevail and there is little use of editing. The way the money passes from one character to another in the film reminds us of the oral tradition in which short stories are passed from generation to generation.

The conclusion is metatextual as well. At the end of the film, we deal with subversion; conventions are reversed: the word seems to have greater power than the image, which is a paradox in cinema. The last sequence breaks every rule in movie-making. The visual retelling of the story (by means of the flashbacks) represents a warranty of authenticity. *Smoke*, the title of the movie, is a metaphor for the blurring of the borders between fact and fiction, good and evil, black and white. Art is like smoke, impalpable and intangible. As Stephanie Harrison put it, “*In typically self-reflexive fashion, ‘Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story’ appears at the end of the film as a reverberating set piece, a story-within-a-story and a movie-within-a-movie*” [11, 559].

The language of film is, indeed, different from the language of literature. And yet, narrative seems to be, as Cohen concluded, “*the most solid median link*” between literature and cinema [4, 92]. In the meantime, Chatman’s contention seems highly plausible: “*Only a general narratology can help to explain what literature and cinema have in common, narratively speaking, and only a good sense of that commonality will permit us to understand what is distinctively cinematic or literary*” [3, 2].

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