Abstract

This talk aims at discussing the use of music, film and culture in an English (or Literature) class at college. We propose an analysis of the feature film “Once” (2006), directed by John Carney, from an intermedial perspective. The narrative is a beautifully woven patchwork of accounts, music, poetry, silence, creativity and partnership. The main characters, an Irish street musician and a young Eastern European girl, start a relationship heavily based on music. Both sing and play musical instruments. The songs they write tell the moving tale of their lives and their search for identity. Both the immigrant and the ‘local’ feel misplaced in Dublin, a city that comprises a great multicultural diversity. The places where they live and the language they use reflect their social background; the lyrics they write show their hope or frustration; the light in the scenes stands for their emotional state. “Once” is a kaleidoscope: it is lyrics, music, colour, images, words and silence. Everything is integrated thus ensuring that language, literature and culture are not studied in isolation. We have noticed that the use of music and film in the classroom greatly motivates the students. They seem to be eager to analyse the cultural – as well as the linguistic – aspects involved, which makes their learning (and our teaching experience) more rewarding. Therefore, we believe that the challenge of using different media in the classroom is essential: the classes become livelier and the students do participate enthusiastically.

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In Art, man reveals himself and not his objects.
   (Rabindranath Tagore)
1. Introduction

Teaching English to adults at the Faculty of Arts (School of Languages / Letras) is a challenge. The classes are heterogeneous and full of students who come to college after a long working day. Most of the time, they are not motivated since they do not have knowledge enough in the target language. These are some of the aspects that have to be taken into consideration by the professors.

We have noticed over the years and after some reflection that there are some ways to instigate the students to awake their interest in their own learning process. The playful aspect is essential, but it has to be associated with contents that enhance a broader understanding of their own world and their reality. This reflection can be done either through comparison or contrast. Whenever cultural aspects are concerned, observing and reflecting about the other lead us to a wider perspective on ourselves.

We think the use of music, films and culture in the English classes greatly contributes to the students’ solid education, regarding both linguistic and cultural aspects. This paper aims at discussing the use of these resources in the classroom. Our analysis is based on the feature film “Once” (2006), written and directed by John Carney.

2. Once: a palimpsest

We have chosen this film for many reasons: it lends itself to a linguistic, cultural, musical, cinematic and poetic analysis. Set in Ireland, it approaches current subjects such as immigration and the search for identity. The lyrics, written by Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, who also play in the film as protagonists, reveal great dramatic poetry. Melody and lyrics complement each other and delight the audience. Involved in the story, the students greedily try to follow the narrative and grasp its nuances, complexities, its voices and silences.

Shot with not much money (only $150,000), the film portrays urban Dublin, its squares, parks, streets, pubs. Shot in only 17 days, the narrative is intense; it reveals Carney’s great artistic talent, as well as Hansard’s and Markéta’s. The protagonists are an Irishman who sings on the streets and a young immigrant from Eastern Europe. One night, while selling “Big Issue” magazine – a magazine for the homeless –, the young girl meets the Irishman singing on Grafton Street, in downtown Dublin. In a subtle way, the film introduces the discussion about one of the central themes related to immigration: What are the professional activities that the immigrants are prepared to do? Are they skilled workers or not? Has the opening to immigration changed their profile? Are the people who arrive in the country now more – or less – prepared than before?

The Irishman and the young girl sing and play instruments. They start a relationship that is strongly based on music. Even though they are undergoing some emotional turbulence in their lives – since both live different situations and try to settle down, conquer their place and consolidate their identities -, they cannot help getting closer and closer. The story of their lives and the tender attraction that they have for each other is told through the songs they write. The songs make the narrative come alive and they become the nucleus of the film. They reveal the characters’ emotions and tell the stories of their ups and downs. The main theme of the songs is a broken heart. The young man, who had been betrayed by his girlfriend who now lives in London, does not seem to have recovered from this blow. In a hilarious scene, while playing his guitar and singing, he tells his new friend that he wishes his ex-lover to die. Music is an element of extreme relevance; it catalyzes emotions, actions and interactions between the characters and it reveals the great desire to communicate that permeates all kinds of artistic expression.
Being an atypical musical, “Once” tends to certain realism when its characters work hard to write their songs. They do not come up with the lyrics and choreography readymade for a big spectacle. Maybe that is the reason why “Once” has an unusual charm. Simplicity is its secret. And it reveals itself in the poetic scene in which the girl plays the piano at the music shop. She does not have a piano at home because, according to her, the instrument is “too expensive in Ireland”. The Irishman, admiring her musical skills, hums one of his own compositions and the girl plays it on the piano. They sing “Falling slowly”, whose lyrics reveal their fond attachment. Curiously, this is the song that won the Oscar for best original song (2008).

Both the immigrant and the native live displaced in Dublin, a city that comprises a huge cultural variety. None of them is named: they are only “the guy” and “the girl”. Some students are bothered by the fact that the protagonists have no name; they believe that not much time was dedicated into building up the characters. At this moment, it is important to highlight that the fact that the characters have no name is an essential point of the film. This simple resource implies the universalization of the characters. At the same time that the guy and the girl live their story, their trajectory stands for the relationship between two people who meet for a reason, experience a huge and transcendental connection, but whose expectations are frustrated and they follow their ways, leaving behind the possibility to love and to surrender to it.

In Scott’s view (2007), a New York Times writer, “Once” is far from being a conventional love story. “It is, instead, the story of a creative partnership that develops by chance and that involves a deeper, riskier bond than mere sex ever could.” Anyway, we can say that searching for the record of the human condition the film presents a “collection of situations which are common to all human beings and are, therefore, universal” (Brito, 2007, p.11 - our translation). Barry Divola (2007) highlights a curiosity: Markéta Irglová, the actress who plays the immigrant who comes and changes the guy’s life, figured out that real life and cinema fantasy can, sometimes, coincide: knowing Hansard for seven years, and despite the fact that he was 37 years old and she was 19, they fell in love and now they live and work together in Dublin.

Along with the songs, sounds and colors, John Carney uses flashback. He reproduces on the screen the subjective dimensions that the protagonist embodies, and skillfully introduces intervals of silence that intensify the narrative. For instance, when the protagonist remembers his ex-girlfriend, he sees himself in a garden full of daisies or remembers jumping on an elastic bed, which refers to happiness and innocence that have gone away. Carney’s language becomes richer, metaphorical; his object-glass turns into a poetic narration line that is almost intimate. The instant understanding of his visual metaphors is as important as the understanding of the words and songs that are in the film.

According to Robert Stam, the cinema, because of the heterogeneity of its materials, becomes complex and subtle. Its audiovisual nature allows

an infinitely richer combinatoire of syntactic and semantic possibilities. The cinema has extremely varied resources, even if some of those resources are rarely used […]. Film forms an ideal site for the orchestration of multiple genres, narrational systems, and forms of writing. Most striking is the high density of information available to the cinema. If the cliché phrase suggests that ‘an image is worth a thousand words’ how much more worthy are the typical film’s hundreds of shots (each formed by hundreds if not thousands of images) as they interact simultaneously with phonetic sound, noises, written materials, and music? (Stam, 2000, p.12)
Using the endless cinematic possibilities highlighted by Robert Stam, John Carney prioritizes private emotion and not public moral. Tony Trace (2007), while praising the director’s work, states:

Carney’s romance extends beyond emotions to include a vision of modern Ireland inspired by a rose-tinted view of the past. Dublin is a place where no one has much money but everyone gets by and shares what they have. The 'locals' and the immigrants are basically the same, living classless, communal lives with open doors and shared resources.

Carney’s lenses show the unexceptional and the trivial in everyday life, which are not always visible in the speed of the urban chaos. His cinematographic language is emotional, clean and synthetic. Using humor, lyricism and an agile text, Carney reveals a contemporary Dublin that is also simultaneously displaced in time. The use of a tape recorder by the protagonists, for instance, seems to refer to a time displacement, to a certain inadequacy of the characters as well as to their socioeconomic background. Nowadays, who would think of recording a tape?

The ties that bound the protagonists become tighter. Robert Stam (2006, p. 17) believes that

The cinema, considering its characteristic role of telling stories about humankind, has perfectly adapted to the narration of the stories of nations and empires, through projections. National self-reliance, generally seen as the precondition of nationality, i.e., the widespread belief that different men share common sources, conditions, locations and desires, was widely associated to the cinematographic fictions. [our translation]

Sharing, therefore, is the keyword. In Carney’s film, the scene in which the guy visits the girl can be read at different levels of comprehension. She lives in Mountjoy Square, a region that is inhabited by immigrants. He enters her apartment and observes. Simple furniture, precarious structure, meager lighting. The low light of the scene does not hide – on the contrary, it reveals. And it reveals the social and emotional condition of the family that hosts him. With little financial resource and a huge desire to share and learn from the other, the doors of her house are open to everybody who wants to be part of that community of foreigners who have just arrived in Dublin.

Despite the child’s joy and excitement, the grandmother sleeps in the couch. Her role as a protective mother who keeps the roots and tradition that she brought from home is subtly shown. The guy is invited for dinner and he accepts immediately. The girl’s mother, who is an immigrant, refuses to use the little English that she knows. In her native language, she lets her daughter know that she thinks the guy is handsome. She prepares dinner, but she does not join them. She does watch television beside the boys from the building either. They already get into the house without asking for permission to do so. All of them are immigrants who watch the soap opera called Fair City in an attempt to learn the language from the country that hosts them. One of them, making fun of it, reproduces a speech from the soap opera: “Are you not pregnant?”

Concerning language, we can observe that the young protagonist does not speak standard English. Entering the music shop, she says that she goes there daily to play ‘one hour for day’. The usage of ‘for day’ instead of ‘a day’ is a strong sociolinguistic clue. However, not speaking the language properly does not generate a distance between the girl and the boy. They get very close to each other and become good friends. Music, the universal language, brings them together and tightens their relationship.
In other moments, the slightly blurred image gives us the impression of affirming the characters’ emotional instability, their doubts, uncertainties, questions. There is an intriguing scene where both (the guy and the girl) take a walk around Dublin and, from the top of a hill, they can see the sea. The sky is cloudy; the sea reflects its grayish tone. The characters look equally cloudy. The young girl confesses that she is married, and talks about her difficult relationship with her husband. The guy asks her how to say “Do you love him” in Czech and she answers, “Noor-esh-ho?” Then, he asks her, “Noor-esh-he?” for he wants to know if the girl still has feelings for her husband. She hesitates and answers, “Noor-ho-tebbe”. Without grasping the meaning of her words, the guy insists because he wants to know what she has just said. Nevertheless, she changes the subject and never reveals the meaning of the expression that meant “I love you”.

John Carney’s movie has an indirect way of saying things. By means of camera movement, lighting, setting, meaningful looks and silence, many unsaid things seem to reveal to the audience. We agree with Antonio Tabucchi when he says, “I like movies about reality, but movies with symbology and metaphor. Art has an oblique way of saying things, looking for obscure areas, wreck areas. [...] Reality is important, but the filter of art is much more important” (Brito, 2007, p. 49). We can easily notice that “Once” has some of these obscure areas, which allow us to dive deeply into them. Its metaphors – visual or musical – filter reality with sophistication and elegance.

At the end of the movie we have a contradictory feeling. The love relationship between the protagonists does not take place, – which can be somewhat frustrating to the audience –, but the tenderness and affection that their look shows indicate the transcendence of their feelings. We realize that the feeling that connects them is special and will last longer than if they had allowed their desire to blossom “only once”.

3. Conclusion

Cinema and music have the magical power to awaken our imagination; their metaphors instigate reflection. Therefore, we believe that their use in the classroom must be encouraged. Even though art, for its aesthetic value, is an activity of non-utilitarian nature, we believe that it must be used in the classroom to promote more dynamic meetings and lead to deeper discussions.

In the cinema, the montage technique has improved and it has consequently “influenced other kinds of art. [...] The usage of the portable camera and the proliferation of cameras multiplied the look properties and, in Art, they taught how to explore beauty segments which were eventually left unobserved in daily life” (Brito, 2007, p. 11). Similarly, the use of different resources in the classroom multiplies the possibilities of look and leads the student to the exploration of different areas of knowledge in a holistic way. Because of its artistic refinement as a mixture of cinema, music, poetry, culture and language all intrinsically interwoven, “Once” promotes a deep reflection on its themes and becomes a great tool to be used in the English / Literature classroom.

References


