

The Waste Land and its Cinematic Afterlives: Critical Analysis of Select Diegetic Readings of the Poem

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Abstract: The cinematic arts unconsciously collect a sense of tradition yet somehow manages to merge it with a sense of modernity and novel ideas and techniques (“Tradition and Individual Talent”). In “The Waste Land”, the poetic voice constantly changes, yet the adaptations try to bring in the sense of temporal continuity by rearranging texts and creating dialogue. The present paper attempts to analyze the on-screen adaptation of the poem in the form of a dramatized film narration. It will try to find how these adaptations carry a sense of tradition and create a new space for themselves. Additionally, there is an attempt made to understand how the narration and the narrating act of the poet/artist/performer interfere with meaning production. The three films used in the following analysis are Deborah Warner’s adaptation of the poem, W. M. Rhine’s adaptation and Fiona Shaw’s performance at Madison Square Garden, New York City. The paper also seeks to answer whether, by using the narratological theory, one can see these adaptations as the “afterlives” of the iconic poem or not.

Keywords: Adaptation, Tradition, Modernity, Performance, Ideal Order, Narrativity, Creativity

The complex range of aesthetic innovations and the presence of an overwhelming encyclopaedism make the poem a complex text to read. The poem entails a non-narrative composed of five sections. The verses deliberately flaunt a profusion of dense allusions, obscure mythological references, disparate utterances, and many multi-lingual citations. Thus

making it not only a challenging read but a prime representative of one, modernist poetics and two, Eliot's idiosyncratic vision of the role of an individual poet within literary history. Conclusively, making *The Waste Land* a problematic text to adapt on-screen.

Literary critics have argued that the poem's fragmented structure co-relates to the effect of cinematic montage; there has been a dearth of actual on-screen adaptations of the same (McCabe, Trotter, Chintz). But however scarce they may be, all of them reflect something novel and literary. Despite the massive popularity of Eliot's poem and their "cinematic" potential, only a select few (like "The Live Song of Alfred J. Prufrock") have been used diegetically and that too in the background (Chinitz 78, 80; Shamriz). Moreover, David Trotter, in his 2006 article "T. S. Eliot and Cinema," delineated how Eliot was inspired by cinema and how "The Waste Land" carries some of its imprints as far as the cinematic technique (like montage) is concerned. In other words, the complex range of aesthetic innovations and the presence of numerous allusions and references are as much a result of Eliot's use of popular and high culture as cinema as an art form.

To borrow Martin Scorsese's words, cinematic art forms offer "aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation" under "the unifying vision of an individual artist," an artist, as Bob Dylan said, was "heroic and visionary" (Scorsese). In the same vein, an adaptation of literary works on-screen adds a dual layer to the text—the literary text is reinterpreted by the director's vision. In the latter's case, the auteur (often a director) engages in a co-creative conversation with the literary author to illuminate the hidden recesses and further the scope of the former. The result ultimately remains the same—to seek and understand how works of art and literature capture, reflect and transform the said/unsaid aspects of the human condition.

Each of the three adaptations has successfully fulfilled this criterion; they are experimental and entail critical observations and commentaries of the contemporary world. The auteurs provide space to the character/s in the adaptations, which are then seen

investigating themes around the essence of being a human being. The frames are set in a manner that there is a visible longing in the faces of the artists who are busy exploring—what it means to be a human being, either by internal or external focalization (from facial cues, body language, and makeup to patched up transitional images to the narrative, cityscapes and backdrops). The audience generates and interprets meaning in relation to themselves, society, and evolution.

Narratology is the scientific theory that constructively and analytically aims at understanding the narrative and structure. Additionally, it also focuses on how the narrative affects human perception. For a narratological analysis, it is customary to study and work with the triadic set of—*text*, *fabula* and *story*. While the literary text encompasses all written words, the films have moving images usually accompanied by sound. A narratological analysis is not only a mere attempt to study the nature of the text but rather an act of perusing texts and examining them as a concept and cultural practice. Gerrard Genette, in his seminal book *Narrative Discourse*, encapsulates the idea that the focus should not be limited to the tale but the way it is told (Barry 231).

Genette discusses two types of narrative modes: mimetic and *diegetic* (Barry 231). The mimetic mode *shows* rather than *tells*. It is dramatized writing, presented to the reader in a more ‘scenic’ way. The latter is a non-dramatized narrative, which is ‘non-scenic’ and presented to the reader in an expeditiously summarizing manner. In practice, writers use both modes in tandem, similar to how Eliot has fashioned his complex narrative in this poem.

On objectively and critically addressing the statement, the cinematic arts unconsciously collect a sense of tradition and somehow merge it with a sense of modernity similar to Eliot’s allusive poetics demonstrated in *The Waste Land*. Eliot expands on this poetics in his seminal essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone [...] His significance, his appreciation of his reaction to the

dead poets” (38). Therefore significantly points out the idea that poetic individuality is not to be found in works of art that strive to isolate or unattach themselves from their history (literary or otherwise) but in works of art in which the voices of their literary ancestors “assert their immortality most vigorously” (38). Additionally, it is critical to note how invention and newness are associated with creativity, without which no new work of art can find its legs and be worthy of appreciation.

A film version of Eliot’s poem performed by Fiona Shaw is a new work of art. It is startlingly modern and vastly different from orthodox adaptations. Nevertheless, it successfully carries a sense of tradition with it—the nuances of stage presence from lighting to body language to the cinematography, the inherent theatricality of the live performance in a robust manner capturing richly varied speech utterances and tones, complimenting the simplicity of the backdrop and the gravitas of the recitation.

It is significant to note the shift when a new work of art is created. “Something happens simultaneously to all works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an *ideal order* among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (really new) work of art among them” (38).



“The Waste Land” Adapted by Deborah Warner, performance by Fiona Shaw (1995)

The nature of Eliot's "ideal order" has been under much scrutiny. Goldman, while quoting Louis Menand, interprets this "ideal order" in a philosophical manner where he states that "...our perception of the new work of art depends on our perception of the history of art, which takes a certain shape—is idealised in our minds (Goldman 93). Eagleton calls it "radical historical relativism", which is "endowed with a status of classical authority" (Eagleton 147). Eagleton further elaborates upon this by pointing out Eliot's company in his poem *The Waste Land*: Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, Milton, Baudelaire, Chaucer etc., who are all dead male poets. It is easy to conclude that Eliot's "ideal order" calls for the preservation of a particular kind of literary order, namely "The Western Literary Tradition," which is very far from being democratic and perpetuates an already established cultural-social value and authority. To bolster Eagleton's understanding, it becomes vital to add Susan Lancer's statement from her seminal essay "Toward a Feminist Narratology," where she quotes "Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan, who feels compelled to ask whether she has written "...an introduction or an obituary" to the field (Shlomith 130; Lancer 342). This is because "the narratives which have provided the foundation of narratology have been either men's texts or texts treated as men's text" for example, "Genette's formulation of a "Discours du Recit" on the basis of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Propp's androcentric morphology of a certain folktale, Greimas on Maupassant, Iser on male novelists from Bunyan to Beckett..." etc. (Lancer 343).

The foundation of the argument stated above can be concluded with Fiona Shaw's performances of *The Waste Land*. Her performances break away from this "ideal order" and establish a newness. This newness is crafty and extraordinarily creative. It simply creates a replacement of order without disturbing or taking anything away from the tradition or essence of the poem. It is a feminist stance, directed by a woman, Deborah Warner, and enacted by a woman, Fiona Shaw; the masterpiece is a towering genius. The performance does not limit its audience or the poem's meaning; Fiona's sincerity and intense performance were found to be

inviting. Fiona's performance also kindly reminds us of Sarah Cane's work "Language and form," where she describes the dramatic use of a single voice for multi-voices consciousness.

Fiona's performance is "difficult" yet refreshing. Coming from a woman adds a different sensibility and subjectivity to the narrative. The internal focalisation lets the audience feel Fiona's intention and read her mind. Even in the poem, we find internal focalisation. In the first section, "The Burial of the Dead," when Marie felt free in the mountains with her cousin: "In the mountains, there you feel free" (17); or where the hyacinth girl was not happy with the gift of flowers: "I was neither Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, Looking into the heart of light, the silence" (39). Although most of the third section, "The Fire Sermon", is externally focalised, we find some parts of it to be internally focalised, thus enabling the reader to understand the typist girl's mind "Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: Well now that's done", and I'm glad it's." (252) or in the same episode, when her lover assaults her, the reader can hear Tiresias' inner feelings, "And I Tiresias have fore suffered all enacted on this same divan or bed; I who have sat by Thebes below the wall and walked among the lowest of the Dead." (246). Focalisation plays a significant role in the process of perception. Information that internal focalisation provides becomes crucial for constructing deeper meanings at the level of memory, the subconscious and emotions.

It is commonly believed that the disparate parts of the poem have their internal unity and coherence—either due to Ezra Pound's caesarean-like editing or Eliot's creative genius or both—and that coherence gets amplified when the poem is read out aloud by varied persona. Starting with Eliot himself, famous personas like Ted Hughes, Fiona Shaw, Alec Guinness, Bob Dylan, et al. have all brought their unique style into the narration and illuminated the specific hitherto hidden meaning of the poem. The fact remains that a mere change in the gender of the speaker, male or female, shifts the narration's emphasis. Fiona's performance puts a female under the spotlight. A female's performance demands attention, a

female's performance demands interpretation, a female performer redirects and reinterprets a man's work of art, a female performer stands and takes command in the middle of the busiest city in the world etc. Thus successfully, it not only keeps up with the tradition and adds to it, but it also highlights her individual talent.

Most importantly, it brings a female, her performance, her role in art and as an artist and her subjectivity to the forefront. As Genette, in his *Narrative Discourse*, states that the focus on how the tale is told is more important than what the tale is about. A woman's narrating act has the ability to tell the tale of her lived experiences which have usually been overlooked.



Fiona Shaw, performing at Madisson Square Garden, NYC



Fiona Shaw, performing at Madison Square Garden, NYC

Fiona's first performance of the poem uses external focalisation on a larger scale. The change of costume for each section and the use of lighting, chair and minimalist curtain backdrop adds to the tone of the poem recital. It utilises colour theory to appropriate responses and reception. Fiona's second performance in Madison Square Park, NYC, is an actual theatrical performance without any costume or backdrop changes. The city's atmosphere, like NYC, is used to address the cityscape Eliot paints in his poem. The popular culture today in NYC may have, to some extent, replaced London and now can represent all things commercial, degeneration of religion and a place where intellectual mobility of women and the working class is easily noticed etc. NYC can be seen imbricating Baudelaire's City of nightmarish encounters, Dante's hell, or what London was when Eliot worked in the financial district as an underwriter. While scene six of Rihane's adaptation uses a single phrase, "Unreal City," a repetition of scene three (10:00-10:33), the intensity of the phrase can encapsulate Eliot's idea

of 'the city' with the help of the simultaneous shot of flies on the garbage follows into the remaining three scenes.



Fiona Shaw reciting “The Waste Land” for the software application, 2011

Additionally, the same narrator can adopt an entirely new narration style over the years, spawning yet another line of interpretation. For instance, Fiona Shaw's 1995 dramatised narration of the poem, with her multiple costume changes in her youth, is starkly different from the 2011 narration she did for *The Waste Land* application. In the latter, the ageing Shaw delivers the lines with a freshness devoid of any ostentatious narration, which is almost conversational. That is to say that the ebb and flow of narration, with its closeness to actual human speech, illuminates other more intimate aspects of human relationships, which are sometimes not too apparent in the ordinary silent reading of the poem.

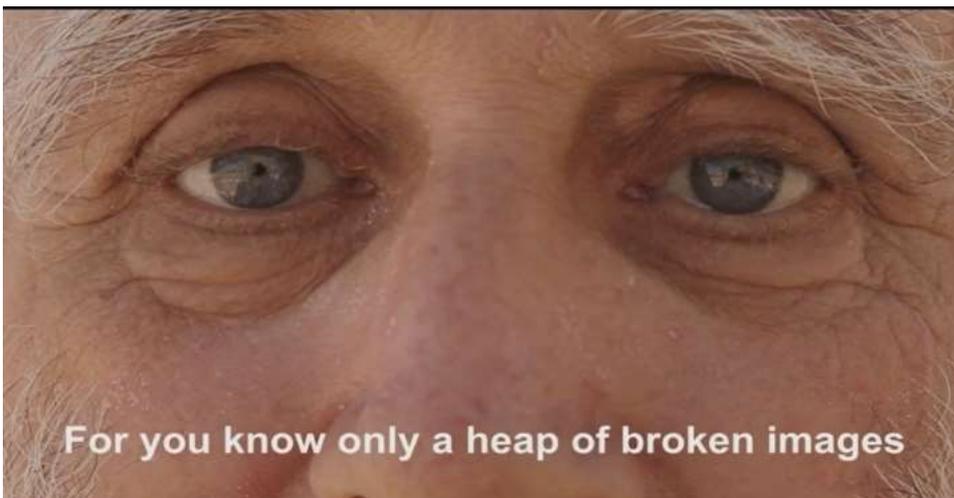


Fiona Shaw reciting “The Waste Land” for the software application, 2011

Walid M. Rihane’s *The Waste Land* adaptation can be seen as an interpretation or a more extensive commentary on the contemporary world. Presently, Rihane is the Education Department Coordinator at the Lebanese International University and an Academic English Instructor at Haigazian University, Lebanon. He conceptualised the screenplay and directed the short film to fulfil the requirement for his bachelor’s in communication arts degree from the Lebanese International University in 2015. The academic influence is visible in the kind of silence and the breakdown/lack of communication that the adaptation deals with.

Through a series of eight scenes, each separated by an all-black transition and no extraneous dialogues except for Eliot’s own recorded voice, the carefully selected and excised lines of the original poem highlight the desolation, dreariness, and spiritual death of human life in “moving” images viz. emotions and movement of scenes. Eliot had recorded “The

Waste Land” in a dull and ominous newsreader-like voice that appears to spell doom for humanity and does not offer any solace, just like the poem itself. Further, by giving the original poet’s sole narrative space and not including any extraneous dialogue, Rihane’s cinematography adds another layer of contemporaneity to this 20th-century masterpiece. For instance, Rihane’s film begins with Tiresias, the most crucial figure in the poem, walking in a barren landscape with Eliot’s ominous voice, “what are the roots that clutch...son of man...broken image” in the background (0:41-2:15). This sets the tone for a parched and hopeless future. A future where humankind has and will “know only a heap of broken images.



Tiresias walking in a barren desert with empty and haunted eyes.

Rihane's interpretation is "difficult," similar to Deborah's. For Eliot, "difficult" is a necessary poetic response to the diverse nexus of historical, cultural and philosophical contexts of the early twentieth century: the wreckage that the first world war brought; the transformation/s of human subjectivity in a quickly developing industrialisation; the post-Darwinian erosion faith; evolution of science rewriting the concepts of space, time and reality etc. These motifs and symbols called for different poetic assembly and construction measures. According to Eliot, the modern poet needed to recognise the call of time and replace the traditionalist realist models of representation with avant-garde Modernist poetics that will "dislocate" language into meaning by an indirect association process. Thus, in Eliot's terms, the poet can be allusive, multiple and estranged.

Deborah adds newness by using a female narrator to the literary history and the literary canon, while Rihane uses various shots and selective lines from the poem to add modern taste and sensibility. Similarly, scene two of Rihane's adaptation shows a contemporary Madame Sosostris reading her Tarot cards and foreseeing the destruction of the entire city/country in a gruesome civil war akin to the hunt of an antelope by a pride of hungry and savage lions (Rihane 2:16-4:18). It reminds the readers of the horrors of the first World War that Eliot himself faced and how since then every civil or intercontinental war has become more lethal and automatic.

However, Rihane goes beyond the literal meaning to suggest the global impact of pollution and climate change on human lives and civilisation. Thus, the exhaustion on Madame Sosostris's face and the prophetic mouthing of "fear death by water" appears incongruous until the scene with a massive Tsunami-induced-flood appears. At this point, its connection with the real-life Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011 becomes quite apparent. Also, the fact that the Tsunami appears in "A Game of Chess" section of the poem with a

beautiful young woman suffering a “mental breakdown” shows the damaging extent of depression as well as relates it to Eliot and Vivienne’s biographical details.



Madame Sosostris with her tarot cards and mobile phone & a heap of plastic and garbage lying in dumpsters.

Similarly, Rihane depicts another attractive middle-aged woman in a club for whom the clock is ticking. She is as lonely as her youthful predecessors. At the same time, the voices and her own smile are hollow and full of pain (Rihane 7:33-9:57). The beads of sweat on her face and her apparent reluctance to move amidst the montage of more bombs and destruction depict that perhaps she is also afraid of dying alone. Even the rose bloom reverses in time to become a bud again. That is, her beauty is left unappreciated (Rihane 8:15-8:18). Similarly, when the female worker is bombarded with mechanical and forced sex, Rihane uses the montage of the copulation of snails to contrast the banality of human relationships, which are otherwise procreative in nature (Rihane 10:34-12:39).

Her hollow smile results from the same spiritual hollowness Eliot once warned of. Truly enough, in the ultimate scene (once again in the desert), the characters are shown as being unaware of the presence of the bloodied Christ (Rihane 12:43-15:08). The messiah is failing to keep up with his flock for whom he has been carrying the cross ever since. The film's beginning and end in the desolate desert link Tiresias and Madame Sosostris as prophetic figures who know what the world will and has come to. This also shows that unlike the character of Madame Sosostris in the poem, who does not know how to tell the correct fortune, Rihane's Madame Sosostris is a real clairvoyant.





Tand the last scene where Christ is unheeded.

Yet, one cannot be sure that this is exactly what Rihane has shown. It is, at best, a conjecture and product of a pattern-seeking mind that wishes to see some logical connection between the disparate montage shots and the scene transitions. And by denying just that, Rihane retains the elusive quality of “The Waste Land” that gives so much joy in arriving at often conflicting and slippery interpretations.

Eagleton has argued that the poem’s intentional obscurity is crucial to its meaning. It adds to Eliot’s intellectual and ideological elitism (150). Being a part of ‘the academic’ circle Walid M. Rihane in his adaption continues this obscurity while painting a connection through various images with the current times. Moreover, Rihane’s and Deborah’s adaptation of The Waste Land reminds us of Brechtian theory. The spectator knows that what he is watching is fiction and is not driven by an emotional identification so that he can complete the play in his mind. The distance or “alienation” is created deliberately to ensure the audience’s involvement in a more intriguing manner giving them space to think and question.

The directors have been able to bring newness as well as creativity to their adaptations. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* runs on a similar tangent as its adaptations. We find that all productions are equally obscure yet surprisingly have the ability to maintain their audience; this is because of the editing techniques used and the temporal continuity of the adaptations created by rearranging the texts and creating a dialogue. It is also important to note that the obscurity is not willful. Still, it is a means to ensure the reader/spectator is able to see and visualise reality from new angles and its elements in new juxtapositions. There are baffling transitions on screen, but surprisingly they are able to utilise the alienation technique, simultaneously subverting the mainstream production techniques used for filmmaking to underline the essential Eliotism. Therefore, they have succeeded in being labelled as afterlives of the poem.

Note

The performance of Fiona Shaw at Madison Square Garden was shot by many photographers and journalists. As to who uploaded the video on Youtube is not known. Additionally, to consider it cinematic is also problematic and beyond the scope of this paper. This paper utilises it only for comparison purposes and to lay emphasis on women's narrating activity as a tool for analysis in the field of Feminist Narratology.

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