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***Matka*: Muteness, Metaphor, Metonymy**

ABSTRACT

To say that *Matka* presents us with essential truths about the human condition may sound trite at best. Nonetheless, the film's very resistance to a reductive reading along these lines suggests the possibility of a specifically 'metaphoric' treatment of these truths that eludes articulation into language.

KEYWORDS

Peter Brooks
Saara Cantell
melodrama
'text of muteness'
metaphor
metonymy

To write about *Matka* is to risk a certain redundancy. Its very 'obviousness', as it were, appears to obviate the need for elaboration. Saara Cantell, for instance, argues that when we watch the protagonist struggling with a heavy suitcase across snowy ground, 'we understand immediately and intuitively something valuable about life and about ourselves.' As a result, 'Any attempt to translate the metaphoric message of *Matka* ("Life is a heavy suitcase" or "A man is just a scream lodged in a piece of luggage") would remain desperately banal' (2004: 115). Nonetheless, it is this very obviousness - operating simultaneously on a double level of banality and profundity - that is intriguing, suggesting as it does something about the 'metaphoric' properties of the film itself. This can be understood both in terms of its status as a 'text of muteness' and in terms of its ultimate refusal of the metonymic structure of narrative meaning.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the film is that it achieves its affect without recourse to language. Indeed, Cantell locates the 'metaphoric' power of the film in its ability to tell its story by audio-visual means alone, with no dialogue (2004: 115). The link between metaphor and 'muteness' has already been well established, most influentially perhaps by Peter Brooks in his study of 19th century stage and novelistic melodrama (1995). Brooks understands melodrama as a modern form for a post-sacred era, where the quest for moral legibility, previously structured by a

transcendental system of belief, has been relocated in the realm of interpersonal relationships and private desires (1995: viii). Melodrama then is motivated by the clash between ethical imperatives and psychic impulses and its operative mode is a refusal of the repressions of the real. This refusal takes the form of an 'acting out', understood in the Freudian sense of a somatic system whereby that which cannot be spoken erupts as a hysterical symptom on the body of the text. Here metaphor appears as the attempt to collapse articulated language back into the direct presentation of meaning, 'a meaning made visible' (Brooks 1995: 72). Thus, the melodramatic text is a 'text of muteness', where the desire to attest to the ineffable is expressed through nonverbal 'excess'.

As Brooks argues, the obvious point of contact between literary and stage melodrama and film melodrama lies in early cinema, which looked to stage melodrama and pantomime for its effects (1995: ix-x). A key figure in this history is D.W. Griffith, whose filmmaking always borders on the 'hysterical', if by that we mean a kind of filmmaking where meaning is enacted on the body itself (1995: xi). The Hollywood melodrama of the 1940s and '50s has also been read as a form of Freudian 'conversion hysteria', where the unexpressed emotion that cannot be accommodated within the narrative erupts in an excessive mise-en-scène, not simply to heighten the emotionality of a scene but as a metaphoric substitute for it (Nowell-Smith 1987: 73).

Although *Matka* lacks the specifically ethical dimension – the polarization of values that Brooks identifies as central, though not essential, to melodrama – approaching the film as a 'text of muteness' may go some way towards accounting for its affect. The difference between this and the examples cited above however lies in the fact that in *Matka* metaphor is not confined to excessive moments within the film's overall system but, as Cantell observes, is sustained for the duration of the short film as a whole (2004: 115). Indeed, the bleak setting itself is typical of the extreme conditions within which melodrama tends to situate its representations of extreme moral and emotional conditions (Brooks 1995: 56). The opening shot, for instance, shows us a blank wall. The camera then moves to reveal, through bars, a high angle view of an icy courtyard through which our protagonist trudges with his heavy

luggage, dramatically setting the scene for the Sisyphean struggle that ensues (Shot 1). The close-up of the suitcase that follows alerts us to its potential significance (Shot 2) and when the next shot tilts upward from the protagonist's feet to his face, it speaks volumes about his – and by implication, our own – predicament (Shot 3).

As the protagonist moves from an urban, nocturnal setting (Shot 4) to a wide-open space as daylight breaks (Shot 5), the music begins and the protagonist occupies the centre of the frame (Shot 6). As he moves through the woods, the lateral movement of the camera picks up momentum (Shot 7) and his air of purposefulness is intensified as we spy other figures on foot, also dragging heavy suitcases and headed in the same direction as he (Shot 11). As the protagonist nears his destination his conquest is signaled visually by his ascent up the mountainside (Shots 21-25). From his initial subjection to the camera's high angle point-of-view (Shot 1), the protagonist completes his arduous journey and is ultimately afforded a masterful perspective on his majestic surroundings (Shot 40). In this way, the film communicates his changing situation through a highly expressive *mise-en-scène*, made all the more effective for its lack of verbal language.

Indeed, the film's status as a 'text of muteness' is literalized in the figure of the protagonist himself. If, as Brooks argues, different types of drama foreground different types of sense deprivations (for instance, tragedy has blindness, comedy, deafness and so on), then melodrama has its mutes, for melodrama is about expression (1995: 57). But muteness is not the same as silence. In addition to the importance of music (the 'melos' to the 'drama') and sound effects, one of the key moments in the film is when the protagonist opens his suitcase and in so doing releases a loud, inarticulate cry (Shots 27-28). The following shot shows the cry emanating from the man himself, a powerful coincidence of voice and body that expresses everything about his situation while saying nothing (Shot 29). This cry, situated in an ineffable register between triumph and desperation, constitutes what Brooks might call 'a moment of victory of pure expression over articulation' (1995: 72).

Following this however, the protagonist's obvious relief - as he retraces his steps his load is visibly lightened (Shots 42-43) - is punctured by the shock of recognition

when he sees himself setting out on the same journey once again, determined to reach an end that is destined also to be a beginning (Shot 44). Here, the horror of recognition is the horror of repetition, of going over the same ground again and again. However, if, as Brooks argues elsewhere, 'Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered' (1977: 285), then what *Matka* enacts is the horrifying prospect of the potentially never-ending condition of narrative itself.

If narrative operates at one level as (essentially spatial) metaphor in that it combines different actions through perceived similarities, producing a structure whereby the end is read as entailed by the beginning, this also necessitates a metonymic (i.e. dynamic) system of movement and linkage of those actions to bring us to that point of retrospective illumination (Brooks 1977: 281). In short, as Brooks puts it, 'We must have metonymy in order to reach metaphor' (1977: 295). The sequential structure of the middle of the story takes us from the beginning to an end that is the 'same-but-different' (1977: 280). The desire for the finality of an ending can be understood ultimately as a desire for death. That is why 'All narration is obituary' (1977: 284), for it is only in death that we can make sense of a life. Nevertheless, the time it takes to reach that ending remains imperative: too soon and we feel cheated, too long and we risk the prospect of the interminable story that can never 'be finally bound in a plot' (1977: 297).

It is in this context then that we can approach *Matka* as 'metaphoric'. This is most obvious perhaps in terms of its status as a 'text of muteness'. But we can also consider this in terms of the film's ultimate refusal of the dynamic figure of metonymy, which would allow the story to come to a satisfactory conclusion; in other words, to 'die the right death' (Brooks 1977: 295). Considering a conclusion returns us also to our own beginning. The resemblance for Brooks between the 'mute gesture' of melodrama and the rhetorical function of metaphor lies in their transference or displacement of meaning. The mute gesture as metaphor demands a renunciation of the semiotic system of decoding in favour of an invitation to decipher, to follow the direction of a 'sign *for* a sign' (1995: 72). Likewise, *Matka* is metaphoric in that it enacts an endless

deferral of significance. As such, its horror is the horror of the interminable story, of going over the same ground again and again with no foreseeable ending. And with no ending, we are refused the illusion of meaning.

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