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From words to images and then to one image: the poster in Spielberg's translations of literary works

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A poster is a piece of a film, once voice, music and editing have been discarded. As Baena Palma (1996: 9) has pointed out in his book about –and with– posters of Spanish and foreign films:

El tratamiento gráfico-estético de muchos de estos trabajos [film posters] logró cimas expresivas y cromáticas de altísimo nivel. En la mayoría de las ocasiones lograban llevar la imaginación del espectador potencial mucho más allá de la propia realidad de las imágenes de la película, como más tarde podía constatar. [...] Fueron, y son hoy, trabajos impregnados de latente eternidad, frente al nebuloso recuerdo de la propia cinta.

A poster is part of a film because it is difficult to see a film –or even to watch it on television– without having seen its poster in some form or other. In this paper I mainly consider only one of these forms: the cover of the video tape which anyone can buy at a video retailer.

The first question to answer is whether the poster stands for the whole film in a metonymic way or whether it is merely a means of attracting the attention of the potential cinemagoer or, as is the case here, of the potential video tape buyer. In this particular case, that of films which translate previous narratives, we must also ask whether there is any reference to the previous literary work, either to the novel or short story as a whole, or to some particular part of it.

Our last question is a twofold one. Firstly, we want to know whether there is any common denominator among these particular posters. Eventually, we wonder whether these posters follow a general trend in the whole of Spielberg's career as a filmmaker or whether, on the contrary, they stand on a different line. Let us analyse each of the posters in detail.

The poster of *Duel* (1973), Spielberg's first film, presents us with an image of a lorry. This drawing seems to represent someone's face, the radiator and the

bumper standing for a wide open mouth which merges with a nose, the wing mirrors looking like big ears, the driver's orange windscreen replacing someone's irritated left eye¹. This personification of the lorry is more explicitly given in the sentence that appears at the bottom of the poster: «When the headlights of a truck become the eyes of a psychopath,» a phrase that is referring to the film rather than to what we can see on the poster, since the headlights of the drawing do not stand out as much as the windscreen we have mentioned before. It is in the film that this sentence acquires its real meaning, especially at the moment when the truck awaits Mann inside a tunnel. The phallic exhaust pipe of the lorry gives it a masculine status, which coincides with a lacanian interpretation of the film as a fight between Mann and the Law of the Father represented by the lorry, eventually ending up in the breakage of Mann's relationship to his mother-like car (Díaz Cuesta 1997a).

«Duel» the short story (Matheson 1971) differs from the poster in paying more attention to action than to the description of the lorry. However the fog that surrounds the truck on the poster –which is what gives the poster a mysterious atmosphere– is closer to the references to the supernatural that are made in Matheson's story.

Jaws (1975) is Spielberg's first top-grossing hit. Its poster also presents us with a *face*, in this case that of a shark, a member of a species also known as man-eater, although here it is a woman, an apparently naked woman, that it is about to devour. As on *Duel's* poster, there is an open menacing mouth, and a pair of eyes and nostrils (the shark's snout), but in this case the power of the face derives mainly from the clearly defined jaws in a dark pitch mouth, as well as from the vertical position of the shark, which is pointing to the very middle of the woman's body. The poster seems to display what happens at the beginning of both book and film, although in the film not until much later are we allowed to see the shark in full view. In both book and film we first share the feelings of the shark and then those of the woman, however in the poster both characters are shown at the same time. The woman seems to be untouched yet, although there is an element of the poster which might be pointing to the actual moment of her being eaten by the shark. I am referring to the title of the film, and more precisely to the red capital letters that form it: «JAWS». Let us analyse it *to the letter*. The central characters of the word –especially the «W»– mirror the *real* jaws that we see at the bottom. It is as if the shark had already

¹ This resemblance with a face was the key factor that, according to Lara and Galán (1973: 46), made Spielberg choose this model of a lorry among many others in the casting it had to undergo, like any other character in a film, enduring even more competition than Dennis Weaver in his casting for the human main character, David Mann. The lorry would be subsequently adapted to resemble a face more closely.

had his taste of the woman, the redness of the letters in the title indicating his thirst for blood. Besides in the poster of the theatrical release the scene we are describing is inscribed –a frame within a frame, to use the cinematic term– within a bigger dark rectangle which would be alluding to the shark’s mouth.

Peter Benchley’s homonymous novel (1974) is overtly mentioned in the theatrical poster: «The terrifying motion picture from the terrifying No. 1 best seller.» Furthermore the poster gets close to the novel in the frequent allusions to sex that we can find in the written work: the poster takes a perverse pleasure in the showing of the actual moment in which some kind of physical contact occurs between the two of them. The film can also be understood under these terms if we compare its plot with *Duel*, Brody instead of Mann, the shark instead of the lorry, and the woman in the poster, Brody’s wife and the boat instead of Mann’s wife and his car. The lacanian interpretation is very clear here, since what makes Brody hunt the shark is its devouring the woman.

Spielberg abandoned the horror film in his next translation into images of a novel, *The Color Purple* (1985). The poster of this film shows Celie’s backlit profile while she is seated on a rocking-chair. Her profile corresponds to that of film *debutante* Whoopi Goldberg, unknown as an actress until this film. She is reading a letter which, once we have seen the film, we have to conclude must be from her sister Nettie. The novel consists of a succession of letters, most of them written by Celie addressing God. In fact, God is also present in the poster by means of the thicker-than-the-rest window frames that form a cross under which Celie is carefully placed, not being crucified by it but rather being sheltered by it (Díaz Cuesta 1997b: 539), like the Fordian sun present in so many of Spielberg’s films. Celie is also shown addressing God in a direct way at the beginning of the film, a device that is cleverly used to justify Celie’s voice-over in the rest of the film.

Alice Walker’s novel (1982) *The Color Purple* is also overtly mentioned by the poster, since its predominant and almost only colour is purple. This colour is used by feminists like Walker as a sort of banner: we must not forget that both film and book try to denounce the exploitation of black women. Furthermore the end of the novel displays a lesbian relationship between Celie and black singer Shug Avery which is softened in the film.

If in *The Color Purple* it was the presence of the sun that justified the backlit image of the poster, in *Empire of the Sun* (1987) that presence acquires an overwhelming nature, since, apart from justifying a backlit picture, the sun occupies the most important part of the poster. Shots of the sun like this are usually considered beautiful, but here the beauty of the image is broken by the smoke trail of a falling aeroplane, which at the bottom is contrasted with the backlit profile of a boy playing with a toy aircraft. The poster is already telling us that the film will account for that contrast between war and childhood. As happened with *The Color Purple*, the image of the poster is borrowed from a

concrete moment in the film: it is the sequence chosen to show Jim's evolution, from a timid rich British child to a confused and daring teenager who is closer to the American mentality of a survivor. In that sequence it is not Jim that is playing with a toy aeroplane but a Japanese boy who will eventually die in the film and with whom Jim develops a kind of friendship in the distance. Only the apparent low position of the wire fence of the poster seems to foretell this mutual understanding of the several nations that are at war, as if wire fences no longer performed any function and any one, from whatever country, could cross them.

J.G. Ballard's best seller (1984) is practically not alluded to in the poster, exception made of the title, «Empire of the Sun», which the overwhelming presence of the sun is obviously mirroring. In addition the smoke trail seems to be indicating a fracture in that empire. This reference may be reinforced by a not so obvious allusion of the poster. I am referring to the moment in which the war is technically over: the explosion of the atomic bomb. In the novel, and more intensely in the film, this explosion is shown as something magic which means the end of Jim's nightmare. The sun of the poster might be denoting the conflict between the beauty of an image and the horror it entails.

We are going to consider *Jurassic Park* (1993a) and *The Lost World* (1997) together, since, as happens with the stories that are told in both books and both films, their posters do not differ much from each other either. For all poster the first of the films shows the logo of the park where dinosaurs have been brought back to life. The logo uses four main colours which can be grouped in two. On the one hand, black and white, which serve for the background and the title of the film, on the other, yellow and red, the former framing the logo, the second allowing us to have a glimpsed profile of a dinosaur skeleton in an aggressive attitude. The overall pattern of the logo resembles one of those warnings indicating danger. The representation of the skeleton instead of a *real* dinosaur may be alluding both to the fact that the story is about the reconstruction of this kind of animal –the subtitle of the poster reads «An Adventure 65 Million Years In The Making»– and to the artifice that lies behind the special effects that constitute the main ingredient of the film. Above all, in a film as commercial as this, what the authors of the poster are creating is an icon, an image that can be easily reproduced on all kinds of things, from T-shirts to mugs, from pens and pencils to underwear. It is well known that Spielberg does not like to have too well known actors and actresses in his films who may be seen as icons by the spectators, instead he prefers to leave that function to the product he creates and to the money that is involved. The latter film, as I have said before, does not add much to the former. The logo is repeated, with a different title but including the title of the first film as a subtitle, to remind us that what we are going to see is a sequel, a continuation. This second film could have perfectly been called *Jurassic Park 2*, but, as the film is

another adaptation of a Michael Crichton's best seller and it is not so common to entitle books in a numbered way, it was preferred to follow the success of both the adapted book and the previous film by quoting from both of them. The second poster also uses the first film in its background, which serves as surface for the logo: it is a rock of the island where the action of the first film took place, above which we can see the living eye of a dinosaur, because «something has survived», as we can read at the bottom of the poster. The realistic representation of the leaves of the plants that surround the logo and of the logo itself on the rock seem to be indicating that what we are about to see is even more real than the first part.

The references to the homonymous novels in both posters are limited to a clear allusion to the plots of the stories. Although the novels contain many diagrams and tables, most of them trying to represent what someone can see on a computer screen, Crichton does not show anything like a logo of the park in his books.

I have already analysed the film poster of *Schindler's List* (1993b) in a previous article² (Díaz Cuesta 1997c: 110):

The overall image shows two arms which hold hands together: the one on top is big and bare, whereas the bottom one is partially covered by a red sleeve which contrasts with the rest of the picture, depicted in sepia tones. The bare arm is completely illuminated, but the sleeve, and the small arm within it, disappear into the pitch darkness of the lower part of the poster. All this is seen through a difficult-to-read list of names and figures which very much resembles the «list» to which the film title refers. The poster therefore tells the spectator to look beyond the list, to where the unimaginable must happen. We shall not discuss if the big hand is Schindler's or not, but what seems clear is that the other one must belong to the child in red, a figure which is emphasised in both novel and film. Nevertheless, the poster stands for something that does not happen in the film: no hand can be seen holding the child's, the one who eventually died. The poster shows an adult holding one of the millions of hands that did not survive the Holocaust, a hand that comes from *The Unbearable, The Unwatchable*, from Horror and Death.

About the novel (*Schindler's List*, originally published as *Schindler's Ark*), I have to add that Keneally does not insist so much on the representation of the list, something which could have been easily done by reproducing part of it: Keneally prefers a more literary style than for example Crichton's display of

² In fact the idea for the present essay came to me from someone attending my previous talk in the second edition of this conference, who showed some surprise/interest for my analysis of *Schindler's List* poster.

diagrams and tables. Only a list with a glossary of SS ranks and their army equivalents (Keneally 1982: 9), together with maps of Cracow and Plaszów (Keneally 1982: 10-12), is given before the author's note at the beginning of the book.

After the analysis of each of the posters we must now give answer to the questions raised at the beginning, but this time taking into account all the films analysed. Answering the first of our questions, whether the posters we have seen stand for the film as a whole in a metonymic way or whether they limit themselves to attracting the attention of the potential video tape buyer, we can conclude, from the analysis of the seven films selected, that they all fulfill the latter function, creating an information gap in the viewer which will be answered by the film. All of them also choose one or two images from one or two important sequences of each film, exception made of *Jurassic Park*, which uses the logo of the park as the only image in the poster, a logo that can be found all throughout the film on vehicles and other gadgets of the park, that is, an image which we can also find in many shots of the film. Douglas Brode (1995: 49) has written on *Jaws* poster that it «captured the film's essence and turned a superior modern monster movie into an icon of popular culture.» Likewise many of the posters have become popular icons which we immediately associate with the film they advertise.

Secondly we have asked ourselves what kind of relationship is established between the posters of the films and the literary works that originated these films. Of the seven films a direct link only appears in *Jaws* and *The Color Purple*, where written reference is made to each novel. This second novel is also alluded to through the purple background of the poster. Furthermore the moment chosen is one in which the main character is reading one of the letters which constitute the novel. Of course there is yet another kind of link between posters and films, which comes from the fact that most of the books that have been translated by Spielberg end up displaying on their covers a reproduction of their corresponding film poster, a consequence common among books which are turned into films as popular as these. In fact there has been the case of *Jaws* the book, which started to be publicised by means of what would become the film poster once the rights of the novel had been bought by the producers of the film³.

Our last question looked for common denominators, firstly among these particular posters and secondly between them and the rest of Spielberg's career. It can be observed that in five of the posters there is some sort of circle which calls the attention of the viewer. Another group of four coincide in using a silo-

³ Let us wait and see what is done with Arthur Golden's novel *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997), which is supposed to be Spielberg's next film.

huetted or backlit figure as the main image of the poster. And all except Spielberg's first film, *Duel*, coincide in their simplicity and lack of detail. The answer to the second part of the question is that all of them can be easily recognised as Spielbergian, due to the appearance of round shapes and back lights which, apart from making reference to the pre-history of cinema as a world of shadows, reflect Spielberg's own logo for Amblin Entertainment. This logo is taken from *ET* (1982), where we can see a backlit profile of Eliot riding his bicycle and driving ET home against a big background shot of a full moon in what constitutes a symbol which stands for the wish for simplicity and the belief in the creation of an illusion, so important in Spielberg's career. It is not surprising that the posters of his translations of literary works –most of them previous best sellers– have become icons of our popular culture. These icons also stand for a dreamer that has turned his worst nightmares into gold, a dreamer that has baptised his own studio with the name «Dreamworks.»

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