

FROM THE STAGE TO THE SCREEN :

THE 1988 SCREEN VERSION OF MILLER'S *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* DIRECTED BY VOLKER SCHLONDORFF(1)

In his Introduction to the *Collected Plays*, (2) Arthur Miller approaches the problem of the difference between drama and film and makes references to the 1951 screen version which underline some key points :

While the play was sometimes called cinematographic in its structure, it failed as a motion picture. I believe that the basic reason -aside from the gross insensitivity permeating its film production- was that the dramatic tension of Willy's memories was destroyed by transferring him, literally, to the locales he had only imagined in the play. There is an inevitable horror in the spectacle of a man losing consciousness of his immediate surroundings to the point where he engages in conversations with unseen persons. The horror is lost (...) when the context actually becomes his imagined world (3).

In a film sequence, the effect of a cut on a new set will usually suggest the idea that we have changed locales. An indeed, though the present action in the play takes place mostly inside Willy Loman's house or in front of it, there are three other places where he goes to on the second day (4), Howard's office, then Charley's, and then the restaurant. When the camera cuts to these three places, we infer Willy has actually been moving around.

But the continuity of Willy's mind, his "head" as Miller would have it, can be represented on the screen just as it is in the play, by the flashbacks, i. e. "the immediate visual drifting of one image into another from the 'past' through a cut"(5); his playing cards with Charley having introduced his vision of his cousin Ben (p. 34), the same vision of Ben only naturally flashes as he is suddenly told he is fired by Howard (p. 65-66). The level of the content then is what is being used under the guise of memories acted upon the stage in the tradition of the revival of ghosts etc., and envisioned on the screen as an actual slice of life. To represent a "transfer" as Miller calls it would need a shot in between, as the two swift shots on the car which are inserted in the 1988 production to show Willy is actually leaving his house to call upon his boss while in the play the diegetic continuity is secured by Linda's phone call, an element which has been omitted in the film (p. 58-9). Besides the techniques of "invisible cutting" altogether demonstrate if need be that there is no connection between the meaning effect -i.e. the signified- continuity vs. discontinuity and the actual editing of the shots. A study of sequences will hopefully develop this point.

But Arthur Miller also refers to other difficulties in the above quoted Introduction :

It did not need this play to teach me that the screen is time-bound and earth-bound compared to the stage, if only because its preponderant emphasis is on the visual image, which, however rapidly it may be changed before our eyes, still displaces its predecessor, while scene-changing with words is instantaneous, and (...) a preceding image can be kept alive through the image that succeeds it. The movie's tendency is always to wipe out what has gone before...(6)

COUP DE THEATRE n° 11
"Arthur Miller"

One can make at least two remarks about these lines. The visual nature of film is a privileged medium to make the viewer's mind forget about time and earth—it frees us from the physical world to a much larger extent than the stage does because of the visual effect of the limits of the frame controlling our vision. As to the belief that the visual image displaces its predecessor, it is untenable; quite on the contrary, the meaning of a shot is entirely dependant on the shots which precede it, in a way quite similar to discourse, using for example the rhematic/thematic analysis of discourse continuity. The movie does not wipe out what has gone before, it refers to it. The referent, if there is one, is within the syntagmatic continuity of the shots (7).

Miller goes on to complain that in the 1951 production the tension between past and present was lost:

There is no swifter method of telling a 'story' (than a movie) but neither is there a more difficult medium in which to keep a pattern of relationships constantly in being. Even in those sequences which retained the real backgrounds for Willy's imaginary confrontations the tension between now and then was lost. I suspect this loss was due to the necessity of shooting the actors close-up—effectively eliminating awareness of their surroundings. The basic failure of the picture was a formal one. It did not solve, nor really attempt to find, a resolution for the problem of keeping the past constantly alive, and that friction, collision, and tension between past and present was the heart of the play's particular construction (8).

It seems Miller is not thinking of the viewer here: the close-up is only directed to us and has nothing to do with the characters or their awareness as shown to us; on the contrary the close-up has come to connote inner consciousness and dream as far as the character is concerned because of the fact we are not shown the surroundings, and therefore, just like an insert, the close-up diverts the viewer's attention to another world, the world of the character's inner vision.

Miller's opinion here seems to contradict his own views about "expressionism" and the semiotic function of a single object when isolated from the paraphernalia of objects usually around it, a function which has been likened to the trope called synecdoche. Indeed by the power of selection and isolation, the object thus brought to attention refers to the paradigm of objects it is culturally associated with. Thus does Miller indicate that a table and chairs and a fridge will signify the kitchen, or the trophy in the Lomans' bare bedroom will epitomize Willy's dreams concerning his sons. Miller also wished the sound of a flute to be heard at the beginning of the play to contrast with Loman's suitcases of samples. The aural effect connotes the life of the mind; we also discover another motivation later on when we hear Loman's father as a pioneer made flutes he used to sell for a living on the road, while the visual effect connotes the life of the body and the fact Loman only carries samples in his bags, not real objects for sale. The suitcases are not any more "realistic" than the flute is; they are synecdoches as well.

These remarks about Miller's allusion to cinematic devices tend to show the broadening of perspective the forty years which have gone by necessarily entail.

When Miller wrote about his *Death of a Salesman* that his idea was first "an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up", he explained his views about life in terms which echo the concerns of his time

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as inherited from the end of the nineteenth century, and in particular from the two James brothers. Miller writes such lines as :

The *Salesman* image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes "next" but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be "brought forward" in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to (9).

In these remarks one can spot the tradition initiated by Henry James for which he coined the expression "felt experience", and described by his brother as the "stream of consciousness".(10) The conversion from the definition of the present as a continuous flow of impressions into a definition of the present as time, for which a new word "duration" was coined by Bergson is a well-known one which Miller inherited unquestioningly as a piece of intuitive truth. The favourite form of time which is thus advocated is simultaneity, and this was represented on the stage in the production by Elia Kazan by transparent scenery and a convention that actors should use doors in the present actions and walk through imaginary walls during actions in the past, so that the same space could be used—a translation into the spatial dimension of the time notion of simultaneity. Thus the house became a metaphor for Willy Loman's head, and the concern was of course with keeping the same convention for scenes where Willy was not in his house. These well-known characteristics of Miller's play call for a few remarks within the later perspective which is ours today.

The disappearing of the notion of future is the immediate result of simultaneity; indeed the future is only conceivable for the present Willy as part of his past pleasant memories, memories which were pleasant for that very reason, since they are memories of his sons' childhood when Willy could imagine their future for them. In the scene in the restaurant the simultaneity of past and present is different: in that scene while Biff is turned narrator and tells his father what happened to him during the day, a tale which is also a confession, the disillusionment is so strong for Willy that he suffers from hallucinations: he first has an aural memory of a scene he cannot have lived but must have reconstructed during the past years from his wife's own account, and which is the scene of Bernard telling Mrs Loman about Biff's failure in maths, a failure which meant he could not go to University. The embedded story-telling makes the vision a complex one, and its link with Biff's confession about stealing Oliver's gold fountain-pen within the pattern of simultaneity is interestingly associated with Loman's own guilt. He turns round and tells Biff he is not the one who "flunked maths", rejecting any responsibility in this catastrophe. The pattern of simultaneity is however impossible to keep and Miller necessarily brings up the actual parallel guilt only after, as it actually occurred in the past; indeed, having failed, Biff left for Boston where he unexpectedly came upon his father in bed with his kept mistress.

In the 1988 production as well as in the play, much simultaneity is derived from the different voices which are heard; in the film in particular, the similitude in pitch between young Bernard's high-pitched voice calling "Mrs. Loman", the telephone operator's female voice calling "Mr. Loman" and the page (if one agrees about this) serves to introduce the Woman's voice : "Willy" which is in the same pitch, so that the voices are blended into one single voice, the voice of guilt and moral conscience.

Paradoxically indeed, while the Jamesian consciousness amounted to an effort to escape the cause-effect pattern of the Victorian guilt-ridden conscience, by translating consciousness into a world where no such painful pattern exists, the world of "duration", the process which was started is clearly that of the increase in power of that very conscience it was meant to suppress. Simultaneity suppressing the future, only the past remains to create the present, a past which is of course weighed down by guilt.

In Loman's case, this guilt is far more than sexual; it is the awareness of having failed to meet the tenets of the American Dream (11). The restaurant scene and the corresponding sequence in the film which will be studied presently offer the interesting characteristic of showing Willy in the process of following the call of his dream. The first call is the voice of punishment: Loman's dream about Biff comes to nothing, but the other female voices are those of success and happiness: the Woman, a platine blonde in the film reminiscent of Marilyn of course, embodies the seductive power of the capitalist's dream (Miller's communism?): her call is one of joy, of eternal laughter, while, paradoxically, it is blended with the operator's call, i.e. the call of the family, another dream-figure of success and life. Another paradox worth mentioning because it is deeply connected with family ties is the contrast between the call of the wild, so to speak, operated on Willy's imagination by the visions he has of his big brother Ben and which cause him to reject Charley's sensible matter-of-fact offer, and the determination Willy shows to fight it out "there", in Brooklyn, rather than launch upon an adventure. This echoes the famous *Acres of Diamonds* text declaring "the industrious, the honest, the determined man can mine diamonds at home, in the city, wherever he is", his success being a matter of character, personality, dynamism, optimism and having the magic and elusive human touch, or charisma (12).

By favouring the simultaneity of past and present to represent Willy's consciousness, Miller causes Willy to display a divided personality, being alternatively quite playful and buoyant in his manner, a manner which is as much the mask of the salesman as the style inspired to him by his natural and naive, even childish, optimism, and, the next minute utterly dejected and humiliated when the past cannot illumine the present, when dream is powerless to hide the truth. Hence the necessity for Happy to keep lying to him, and the near impossibility for Biff to state the truth in front of him. Such is the achievement of Dustin Hoffman in the 1988 production - a constant metamorphosis which is established from the outset with the first sequence, an opening sequence in which he is able to shift all of a sudden from a sweet lyrical tone when plunged in memories of the house as it used to be to the shrieks of a maniac complaining about closed windows though these are all open (13).

A closer study of a particular sequence, the sequence in the restaurant from the shot showing Willy's arrival through the entrance door till his exit by the lavatory door, may prove rewarding in several respects in so far as an assessment of the film's achievement is required (pp. 83-90).

The paradigm (14) of shooting angles is used with a special effect, since the sequence being predominantly shot in a standard angle when the trio moves about the room or sits at the table, a sharp downward angle on Biff lying on his back on the

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floor, followed by a sharp upward one on him as he has risen and has turned round, suddenly modify this effect of camera transparency and underline the violence of the father/son conflict. This change in angle is used to frame the climactic "Why did I go?" uttered by Biff, a question which introduces his cruel statement about his father's decadence. The upward angle on Biff is maintained as Willy snarls back at him and pulls him into the frame by catching his necktie, with the effect of introducing a sharp diagonal line of composition within the otherwise predominantly vertical and horizontal lines.

Contributing to this highly dramatic shot is the semantic paradigm of scale; most of the sequence is shot in medium close shot, the table with its single "expressionistic" flower being used to gather the trio within the narrow limits of a restricted space not unlike an arena or a boxing ring. Within the limits of this general scale, the camera cuts to close shots which group Happy and his father on one side, the left, and isolate Biff confronting them on the right. This division of the group allows the free play of editing techniques such as shot-counter-shot in order to give the dialogue its continuity and rhythm.

A special effect is obtained when this restriction of our field of vision on either Willy (and Happy close by) or Biff is combined with the tracking-panning movement of the camera to the right. Biff is framed alone and the direction of his face to the left makes us situate Willy very near to the exterior left side of the frame; as a result his profile is twice made to penetrate the frame from the left, which gives his head special emphasis. Actually his head protrudes within the close shot on Biff's face thus connoting aggressivity and indignation, Biff's reaction being then to move slightly backwards, and the battle of words between them becoming a fight for the occupation of the space of the screen, a traditional technique in which the screen becomes a metaphor for power (15). Here the metaphor connotes the power of family ties (a notion also connoted by the actual tie Willy grabs), and the characteristic to and fro movement of Willy's feelings, from tears of joy to tears of frustration.

This special effect is brought to a climax when Willy actually pushes Biff's jaw and tries to push him away, a thrust Biff is able to resist, the struggle being rendered by a re-framing of Biff's head along the right side of the frame. A few seconds later, the device is exploited to yet a greater effect. A close shot frames Willy bending forward to the right in Biff's direction. The camera then cuts swiftly to Willy in a slight upward angle as seen in the previous shot looking down at Biff (Biff has squatted on his heels to speak to his father at his level since Willy is seated). It then cuts just as fast back to the shot showing Willy bending forward and pans to the right in order to re-frame Biff as he sprawls backward on the floor. The effect is to lengthen space to the right and to the left, while the overall choice of an extremely restricted, suffocating space to connote the strength of family ties is maintained. This much distorted imaginary frame serves to underline the restriction of space in the following climactic shot framing the trio in close-shot as Willy is pulling Biff's necktie. The paradigm of scale is thus put to use to emphasize the terrible struggle between father and son which is under way and which will end in the kitchen at home with Biff's full emancipation from make-believe and, inversely, his father's total immersion in self-deception to the point of selling his life for a hypothetical life-insurance.

The use of the paradigm of direction is also worth mentioning in this sequence. It is invested with semantic significance as it serves to support the axis of

the father/son conflict in combination with the above quoted play on upward/downward angles. Indeed when Biff is shot with an upward angle (as if seen by Willy), he has crossed the frame (for the second time) and is now standing on the left. This underlines the inversion in their relationship: it looks as if on the right Biff is the submissive son trying to explain things in order to soothe his father while on the left he is the rebel adult assuming his newly asserted identity. On the right, Biff even looks crushed (sprawling on his back in a downward angle, a conventional semantic investment of this shooting angle), but on the left he looks threatening and powerful.

Left vs. right also serve to represent Willy's own divided attention in the sequence—in keeping with the general law of 'simultaneity' in the text; when replying to Biff, he looks to the right, or at least ahead, but when he replies to the voice-off, he turns his head round, to the left when he is seated, and yells "I'm not there" (p. 88), and "No,no,no!" (p. 88) as if to somebody behind his back. The aural counterpoint of voices, the conversational tone vs. the distant high-pitched female intonation, is emphasized by this directional counterpoint.

Thus is space behind him invested with a special significance which could be paraphrased as: his memory is haunting him. But he also moves towards a place of dreams to the right when he hears Bernard's equally youthful and high pitched voice, as if he were being triggered by the voice in the pursuit of an imaginary vision. When Bernard's voice is heard he stands up and starts walking with faltering steps to the right, a part of the frame which has been left temporarily void by another of Biff's moves towards the left of the frame. The camera then follows him, constantly and smoothly reframing his head and shoulders as he plods ahead, discovering a grey Bernard through the window standing in an odd frontal position, his arm outstretched to the left of the frame, while Willy's own arm is outstretched to the right in front of him.

The whole sequence is given unity by the symmetrical use of shot-counter-shots in the beginning of the father/son confrontation and in the end, while the central part of the sequence is shot in a continuous re-framing unit thanks to a lateral tracking-panning camera movement. While Willy moves to the right with the clockwork regularity of an automaton, he also sometimes spins round as if to go back (i.e. to the left) but being followed by his sons they immediately surround him. Thus is the fountain-pen exhibited by Willy in a whirling movement; the fountainpen—a phallic symbol if we are to believe psychoanalysts—is certainly another family tie, since Biff's kleptomania has been encouraged by his own father as a substitute for the heroic grandeur of the conquering fore-fathers, Willy's father (who made flutes and made a living out of their sale as said above) and Willy's big brother Ben who came back a wealthy man from Africa. The pen not only has the elongated shape of a flute but its golden fabric connotes the African diamonds of Uncle Ben. The spectator has been made aware of the symbolic value of the fountain-pen when Biff confessed to his brother: "I just wanted to take it", a stutter in the actor's enunciation on "to" and "take" having conveniently underlined the idea. But there is no cut here to exhibit the said emblem; a continuous camera movement envelops the symbolic object within the texture of Willy's hazy dream.

The circular movement around the room is given a smooth regularity which gives Willy dramatic prominence as he takes the initiative, as it were, though being himself led by a voice. It is introduced in parallel with music on the sound track and

the voices calling one after another. In addition to these contrapuntal elements the camera frames Miss Forsythe twice, once as the trio sits down and another time when Willy collides with her in the doorway. This contributes to the tension of the present scene, a tension already brought to great intensity by the conflict between the voices of the past and the voices of the present, as has already been pointed out, Biff's confession in the present being combined or superimposed with Willy's guilty memory of Biff's failure in maths. The tension is kept up by another effect due to the succession of voices heard in the distance; because they all sound alike the persistent effect is more confusing, connoting the mental confusion Willy is experiencing. The superimposition of the two call-girls' giggle with the Woman's own draws upon the technique of association of ideas through analogy, and makes the following sequence in the hotel more plausible. The final shot showing Willy's exit as the two girls have settled down — a medium shot is suddenly introduced then with the effect of an anticlimax — is carefully composed: a predominantly red wall fills in the frame to the left, in Willy's back, as he is shown leaning over and opening the door of the toilets like the peeping-tom he is, always on the threshold of reality, enmeshed within a world of make-believe and pretence.

These remarks on the sequence in the restaurant tend to show Schlöndorff's style in this movie is a very classical one, making the camera mostly unobtrusive or so it seems. The shooting actually achieves the fusion of the two supposedly irreconcilable trends of the cinema described by critics in the 1960s, the editing ethics and its effects of montage, ultimately traceable to Eisenstein, and the re-framing ethics and its effects of realism, ascribable first and foremost to André Bazin (16). Some cuts in this sequence are indeed quite effective to create an illusion of realism, as the analysis of the shots showing Willy pushing his son backwards demonstrates, (indeed as all the techniques of invisible cutting are), while the camera movement following Willy in his circular madness is far from being unobtrusive, since it connotes Willy's consciousness because it is simultaneous with the music and the voices in the distance.

Classicism today may be defined as the art of putting to significant use whatever aural or visual element is deemed necessary, making the cinematic techniques either highly symbolic as indications of the enunciation of the film-director or totally transparent, indicating enunciation differently — as a wilful delegation of symbolism to the level of diegesis.

The hypothesis holds good if we turn to the first sequence in Schlöndorff's movie for confirmation. The extensive use of parallel editing in this sequence fulfills the function of Elia Kazan's semi-transparent set in order to represent simultaneity and continuity. The parallel editing also shows promiscuity as the open windows are carefully framed in an outdoor shot to show that each party might hear the other (and the boys as a matter of fact react to what Willy is saying to Linda). Another time, the windows are also shot from outdoors, this time to show the identification of the house to the characters' soul, in particular Willy's as he is framed by the window bars and shown attempting to open the sash even more. The boys are shown in their attic bedroom with the projected shadows of many bars on their ceiling, and the sash windows also look rather like prison windows. The house symbolizes their failure, their worries as well as the memories enclosed in the room. The use of parallel editing therefore contributes to the general symbolism of place in this introductory sequence, representing the absence of future in a present whose sole meaning relies upon the

past, and Willy's predicament as his sons represent both the glorious dreams of the past and the agonizing failure of the present.

But editing in this opening sequence is combined with camera movements, in particular to represent Willy's divided self as he moves to and fro within the limits of his narrow bedroom, and Biff's own tormented soul like an echo of his father's in the shots on the boys' room. Concerning Willy's consciousness, the shots in the bedroom show the bed limiting space on the left — the privileged place where Linda keeps sitting most of the time like a magnet around which Willy revolves and the other end of the room where a chest of drawers with the trophy and the photograph of the Chevvy as well as a large mirror can be seen. The camera movements serve to emphasize the meaning of Willy's words, as when he says: "Biff Loman is lost..." (p. 11) extending his hand vaguely but, from our angle, seemingly in the direction of the trophy, only to stumble on a contradiction, concluding that Biff is not lazy while he declared the contrary a few seconds before; the use of the present in both utterances serves of course to create simultaneity between the past (when Biff was not lazy) and the present (when he is). But editing is also used to emphasize Willy's words as the re-framing on the photograph of the Chevvy is interrupted by a cut with a close-up on his face ; or, more remarkably, when simultaneity and overlapping are being used in the dialogue. Linda's double "shsh!" is coupled with Willy's: "The trouble is..", then suddenly Willy is alone to speak and says "bum" to great effect. Another instance of the careful exploitation of cinematic techniques with a view to serving the dialogue is to be found with "whipped", a word which applies to cheese but connotes Willy's painful awareness of failure as well. The word is inserted as the parallel editing reverts to Willy's bedroom; in the same way, the first shift to the boys' room ends with Willy's "the boys in?" and Linda's reply.

Indeed most of the editing exploits the convention according to which one usually cuts to the next sound track slightly before the visual cut occurs, by making voices off heard quite often, another way of signalling the fact they can hear one another. Because the cross-cutting in dialogues also makes an extensive use of the reaction shot, making us see the addressee while overhearing the speaker, when utterance and shot suddenly coincide, the effect is striking enough to emphasize the symbolic meaning of the words being spoken then. These are some of the techniques the observer cannot miss, and, though there are presumably others which have been overlooked here, none has been noted to contradict the previously suggested hypothesis about the classicism of the film along with a new definition of such classicism.

The question remains whether we are made to associate constantly with Willy Loman's inner thoughts and whether absolute inner focalization on him, which was Miller's initial idea, is achieved. Other films have attempted the same effect, Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*, Alain Resnais's *Providence* , and of course most of Fellini's films, the very echo of his *8 1/2* being clearly to be found in the first shots of Schlöndorff's production. Serving Miller's text and its inherent contradictions seems to have been the preferred choice of this film, the result being quite as moving as the play, though, paradoxically, because of the forty years' perspective, the film itself may strike the viewer as behind the times.

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NOTES

- (1) The screenplay of the film was done by Arthur Miller himself. This information was kindly given by Dr. J. P. Berthomé during the Colloque International Arthur Miller at the University of Rennes 2 Haute Bretagne.
- (2) Arthur Miller *Collected Plays* New-York : Viking Press, 1957.
- (3) Miller *Collected Plays*, p. 26.
- (4) All references to the text are given after the quotation in page numbers; they are to the Penguin edition. The second day starts with Act II, p. 55.
- (5) Maureen Turim *Flashbacks in Film Memory and History* New-York : Routledge, Chapman and Hall 1989, 1-5.
- (6) Introduction, p.27.
- (7) Christian Metz *Essais sur la signification au cinéma* 2 vols. Paris : Klincksieck (1968) 1983.
- (8) Introduction, p. 27.
- (9) Introduction, p.23.
- (10) Henry James (1843-1916) et William James (1842-1910).
- (11) Thomas E. Porter *Myth and Modern American Drama* Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 1969, pp. 127-52.
- (12) Porter, id.
- (13) While the first two interprets of the role were contrasted as each having chosen one of either styles, Paul Muni creating a pitiful failure of a man for the English public, and Lee Cobb directed by Elia Kazan creating
an American fool much in the style of Babbitt.cf.A. Miller "The American Theater", *Holiday*, XVII (January 1955), 90-104.
- (14) My hypothesis here is that the cinematic devices such as shooting angle, framing, camera movement, etc. correspond to semantic paradigms and they are analysed as such in this paper. That is to say upper/lower angles are the poles of the semantic axis or paradigm of shooting angle, and imply one another; close shot/long shot also belong to a polarized semantic axis; editing/camera movement are interesting poles of the semantic category continuous/discontinuous, and so forth.
- (15) The device is used to the full of its comic capacities in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, as the barber on the right side of the frame tries to push the trooper away, but the latter moves forward from left to right and pushes the barber literally out of the frame to the right.
- (16) Peter Wollen *Sign and Meaning in the Cinema* London: Thames & Hudson, 1969 ; Andrew Tudor *Theories of Film* London: Viking Press and British Film Institute, 1973.