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Bullet Sized

Abstract

Taking as a touchstone A.L. Kennedy's observation about the disproportionate impact of the short story compared to its size, this article explores the extent to which David Von Ancken's adaptation of Tobias Wolff's text finds, via montage and perspective, a cinematic analogue to the aesthetic form of the short story.

Keywords: fragment; memory; montage; realism; short story; time

In 2008, seeking to define one of the central contradictions of the short story, the writer A.L. Kennedy argued that a short story is 'small in a way that a bullet is small' (Kennedy 2008: 3). On the one hand, the short story is so small as to be ephemeral; on the other hand, its compactness is key to its significance. Although Ailsa Cox has critiqued not only the 'resort to metaphor' but also the militarism of the analogy (Cox 2018: 67), Kennedy's hyperbolic claim finds a suitable counterpart in Tobias Wolff's 'Bullet in the Brain' (1995). Wolff's story, though, is unusual in that its use of stylised techniques rubs up against the realism that he regards as 'the dominant impulse of American literature' (Wolff 1993: viii). Instead, the story's 'odd positioning in or around the subject of realism' (March-Russell 2009: 245) contributes to the frame-shattering effects of the narrative.

I am interested, then, in how David Von Ancken's adaptation translates these effects to the screen. The first thing to note is that Von Ancken does not pick up on the start of Wolff's narrative until more than a third of the way into his own film (Shot 65). Wolff's narrator states all we need to know about Anders in less than a single line: 'a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he

reviewed' (Wolff 1997: 200). Von Ancken's film therefore expands Wolff's story yet the first four-and-a-half minutes do not feel like padding; they retain the concision of Wolff's narration whilst relying upon a different set of techniques. Both narratives start *in media res* – Anders already in the bank queue in Wolff's story; Anders navigating a crowd of pedestrians in Von Ancken's film – but whereas Wolff relies upon an impersonal, third-person narration, Von Ancken uses montage to create his impression of Anders.

In Wolff's story the reader knows nothing of Anders' physical appearance. In the film, Anders physically stands out of the crowd, accentuated by actor Tom Noonan's gaunt, bald and bearded appearance, his dress (old-fashioned belt and braces with sleeves rolled-up) and the use of close-ups, so extreme that Anders' physical outline blurs and becomes indistinct. In Shots 2-7, we see him more or less face-on; in Shots 9-11 mostly in profile; and from Shots 12-14 as a receding figure. This sequence creates the impression of viewing Anders in the round but, in truth, what we are actually seeing are parts of the physical man. Taken as a whole, the sequence figures Anders as someone rushing against time – an idea consolidated in Shot 15 when the montage cuts to Anders slowly winding-up his watch in the classroom – but, more acutely, as someone on the point of fragmentation. The fragment is, of course, a necessary constituent of montage but also of the short story in which, as Julio Cortázar suggests, 'a fragment of reality' is extracted 'but in such a way that this segment acts like an explosion which fully opens a much more ample reality' (Cortázar 1994: 246). Wolff's controlled, naturalistic opening to his short story fools the reader into thinking that it is the totality of its realism. Instead, it is but a fragment removed from the outside world until the bank robbers burst into both the setting and the narrative frame. Von Ancken, by contrast, emphasises the very fragmentariness of Anders' physical world: a fragmentation inherent in both the form and content of his adaptation.

By necessity, the textuality of the short story tends towards spatial form; time, by contrast, is the true medium of film. The concept of time enters Wolff's story more than two-thirds in, first as 'brain time' (Wolff 1997: 204) and then in the final paragraph: 'But for now Anders can still make time' (206). Curiously, this is the point (from Shot 143 onwards) when Von Ancken adopts the literary technique of a voice-over; voiced by that most literary of men, the editor George Plimpton. By contrast, in the original story, this is the point (replicated in Shots 153-158) when Wolff, still maintaining his impersonal narrative voice, discards social realism for a minute description of the bullet's entry into Anders' brain. Film and story flip over; one becomes more literary and spatial, the other more visual and temporal. This slippage, however, disguises a deeper truth that Von Ancken's film explores: that time and space are not mutually exclusive categories but intricately interrelated. The blurred, upside-down image of Anders in Shot 161, followed immediately by the caption 'Passed before his eyes' in Shot 162, emphasise the relativistic notion that the significance of a physical phenomenon is solely dependent upon its relation to an observer, a spatial relationship that is itself subject to time in which the observer's position is anything but fixed.

Both film and story progress toward a Proustian sense of time regained. In Wolff's story, the key phrase, 'they is' (Shot 210) not only reconnects the jaded literary critic to a time and place but also to a distinctly American idiom, one celebrated by such nineteenth-century authors as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, and which Wolff regards as the cornerstone to an American realist tradition. To this end, we should also note that Von Ancken's film starts with the fluttering of a US flag (Shot 1), which signals that this tale of redemption is somehow to be read/viewed as a quintessentially American narrative.

Yet Von Ancken's use of montage introduces an altogether different way of reading the same story – one that is both more temporal and cinematic, yet also in keeping with the aesthetics of its source material. Whereas Wolff's narrator clearly delineates between 'what

Anders did not remember' and 'what he did' (Wolff 1997: 204), Von Ancken mixes these remembered and unremembered memories. At first, this sequence (Shots 165-187) not only appears to follow Wolff's text but is also reinforced by Von Ancken's interpolation of Anders ruthlessly, joyfully, even sadistically editing his students' work so that it also seems as if this is Anders' own mind's eye deleting his memories. However, while the bullet completes 'its work' of carrying away Anders' life (Shots 227-232), Von Ancken effectively superimposes one of these forgotten memories, the death of a woman 'just days after [Anders'] daughter was born' (Shot 183), onto the recollected memory in Shots 233 and 244. More than this – Von Ancken appears to rush this memory on so that the closing shot, bearing the echoed words '*they is*', is of the older Anders flinging wide his arms as if to embrace the life of the city as it passes by him. This is more than a deviation from Wolff's text; it suggests instead that this memory has not been lost – edited out of existence – but retained, held up, transcended. Von Ancken's film, then, ends on a genuine moment of epiphany in which time is not only regained but Anders' flawed humanity is also redeemed.

Von Ancken's adaptation is only faithful, in a strict sense, up to a point. It effectively embeds Wolff's original narrative into its own storytelling frame and then draws out a theme – time – which is only incidental in Wolff's story but of great importance to Von Ancken's own medium of film. The use of montage not only deviates from Wolff's stylistic and thematic scope but it also enables other kinds of juxtaposition: the young Anders' equal obsession with time-keeping (Shots 201b-203); the similarity between his dying wife in profile (Shot 190) and the portrait by Picasso that Anders shows his students (Shot 189); the woman's unseen suicide mentioned in Shot 183 and the death of his own desires in Shots 185-188; or the look between the injured guard and Anders' dying gaze in Shots 222-226. These deviations, though, are in name only; in effect, they both embody the spirit of Wolff's

story and generate new forms of resonance. In that sense, Von Ancken captures the self-contained yet resonant qualities of the short story.

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