The Faulkner Phenomenon: James Franco’s Revival of the Southern Gothic in Twenty-First Century Hollywood

One of the many arguments made regarding adaptation is that the film can never do the original text justice due to the highly integral structure imparted by the literary author. It is particularly difficult to translate a piece from a prior century in the modern era. One contemporary filmmaker who has persistently risen to this challenge is James Franco, who has become a sort of “boy wonder” in Hollywood, fulfilling roles of actor, writer, director, and producer. In 2013 and 2014 he directed and starred in adaptations of William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying (1930) and The Sound and the Fury (1929), respectively. Prior to Franco’s films, Martin Ritt directed a 1959 “deconstructive adaptation” of The Sound of the Fury, which has been criticized for simply being plot-focused, producing a “‘ludicrous’ melodramatic version” that disregards the stylistics of Modernism (Metz 21). Faulkner’s literary techniques of multiple stream-of-consciousness narratives and temporal disjunction in character and setting pose challenges for traditional cinematic form. Yoknapatawpha County creates the ideal cinematic landscape for character and acting such as in Benjy’s movement—or rather, the translation of linguistic confinement in physical space. Franco’s revitalization of the Southern Gothic in The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying demonstrates a preoccupation with the alienated self and the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity that is prevalent in twenty-first century America. While his adaptations and performances take aesthetic risks and (mostly) transcend the qualities of literary Modernism through Postmodern cinematic techniques, they still appeal to box office consumerism.

On September 25th, 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi, William Faulkner was born into an upper-middle class family who would move to Oxford nearly five years later. The shift from the rural life of small-town New Albany to the more urbanized Oxford would not only render his
father “speechless with wonder” (Blotner 11), but would also be a personal demonstration of emerging modernity prior to the turn of the period. Though it was clear early on in Faulkner’s life that he possessed literary talent, the schoolroom “seemed impossibly confining” (Blotner 33) from early childhood, even carrying into his time as a less-than-agreeable student at Ole Miss. Leaving the university without a degree, he quickly emerged as one of the dominant writers in twentieth-century America. Notorious for the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity between time and space in his novels, Faulkner became one of the forefathers of Modernism. Arising as a response to the incapability of traditional literary forms to accurately portray the personal atrocities of World War I, Modernism led to a self-conscious break with traditional writing forms, often utilizing interiority and introspection.

Besides belonging to the tradition of Modernism, Faulkner’s writing is often seen as belonging to the American South, and, more specifically, as evoking the Southern Gothic. While Faulkner did not consider himself to be inextricably native to the region, he “used the South to represent the modern in its complexity and contradictions” (Palmer 121). Whereas Romanticism utilized the Gothic mode as a reaction to the Enlightenment, Modernism uses the macabre and irony in the Southern Gothic to critique modernity, often addressing themes of madness, decay (natural and human), the tension between past and present, and the fall of the traditions of the Old South. His novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* “occupy an intermediate space, in which we can seed a change in emphasis from the decadent aristocracy theme” to a destabilized Southern sphere (Palmer 122). Much literary criticism places Faulkner centrally within the Southern tradition, which is largely due to the way that he favours the local over the regional: the local space speaks “to a deeply historical, unevenly developed, deviant, anachronistic, idio-
syncratic place that extends, both in temporal and spatial dimensions, well beyond anything envisioned by literary regionalism” (Ladd 11). Faulkner emphasizes the impending doom of modernity and the theme of the “cursed land” through his construction of the mythical Yoknapatawpha County, whose topography lends itself to the Southern Gothic in its incessant push and pull of the land, tradition, and time.

For our purposes, Faulkner’s extensive contribution to Modernism will be narrowed to his two major works: *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*. It is crucial to acknowledge Faulkner’s role as a creator, as well as his experience in the Hollywood film industry. Briefly employed as a screenwriter, Faulkner had many qualms about the way that cinema compromised the artist, or “the way that the individual’s work was subsumed into the larger machine” (Mauritzen 119). While many critics argue that Faulkner’s writing is inherently cinematic, such as in his “use of a montage structure in *The Sound and the Fury,*” he deliberately set out to make his Modernist novels “unfilmable” by employing “characteristics of recursive nonlinearity” (Mauritzen 118, 120). Faulkner’s idea was to force the reader to “create” a narrative out of fragmented pieces, much like his own creative, largely in-the-moment experimental form, and, in regard to film, to go in stark opposition to its “mechanized linearity — the inability to step outside of the mechanical pull of the film through the projector and the resulting unstoppable pull of the narrative forward” (Mauritzen 120). Furthermore, he felt great disdain for the consumerist nature of the film industry; ironically, his writing would become some of the most highly consumed works of Modernist fiction.

Having situated the texts within literary and biographical scopes, one can then proceed to examine the way that Franco adapts Faulkner’s Modernist aesthetics and Southern Gothic for a twenty-first century audience. In his mise-en-scène, Franco uses the physical space of set and
movement to relay the expansiveness of Faulkner’s narrative and geography that is utilized on the physical page. As I Lay Dying takes place over the course of nine days, following the Bundren family’s journey through Yoknapatawpha County as they look for honour by carrying Addie’s coffin to the “family burying-ground in Jefferson” (Faulkner, Dying 18). In the novel, the extensiveness of local Southern topography is alluded to through the sheer movement of the family’s journey. In Franco’s adaptation, he demonstrates this vast physical space through artful shots of the landscape, particularly emphasizing the juxtaposition between the natural land and the inevitable decay of the cursed land. Nyerges explains that the “movements through the space of Jefferson are cinematic in that they react (as would narrative film) to the instrumentality of a nonliving agent” (61). In this case, the nonliving agent is Addie’s body, which holds the greatest agency, “signified by the increasing odor of decaying flesh during the seven-day trip into Jefferson, as well as by the power of her will to control her family even after she is dead” (Palmer 129). Her coffin is the most distinct piece of mise-en-scène, and Franco provides many artful shots of its construction, destruction, and echoing of Addie’s deathbed. Plot and duration is entirely centralized around her coffin so as to “not keep her waiting” (Faulkner, Dying 19), moving from the Bundren household, over the bridge, and finally to Jefferson. The notion of the “cursed land” is further exhibited through the weather, “the rain shutting down betwixt [them]” (Faulkner, Dying 36). Franco draws attention to the volatile nature of the cursed land through shots of heavy rain, as well as to death and decay through intense heat signified by the characters’ sweat-drenched clothes and their reactions to the incessant smell emanating from Addie’s body.

Whereas the decay of land and tradition is inherently tied to the “dirt poor” nature of the Bundren family, the fall from nobility of the Compson family in The Sound and the Fury is localized around the Compson house and the six hundred acres it inhabits. Palmer explains that the
“white trash aesthetics” of *As I Lay Dying* mirror *The Sound and the Fury* in that “there is an appropriate symmetry in the contrast between the ruling-class family whose mother is absent while alive and the lower-class family whose mother maintains a central presence after death” (129).

To exemplify the fall of the Old South in *The Sound and the Fury*, Franco draws attention to place, particularly the expansiveness of the house and its land. The film opens with a slow tracking shot that deliberately begins at a distance so as to take in the prestige of its architecture, then moves inward to its interior, which is empty but contains all the markers of old money, signaled through decorum. Franco layers the vast but declining physical space of the archetypal plantation house with the history of the fall, as the narrative voiceover tells us that it was once the governor’s house, though now is a reminder of “what was left”. Franco accurately depicts the tension of the Old South through the long shots of the Compson house, high modernity in Cambridge, and the land-encroaching town of Jefferson. Other specific elements of mise-en-scène point to emerging modernity, particularly telegrams and automobiles.

The tension between the way the land once was and the way it is changing is also addressed through sound. In Quentin’s section of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, time is something that he wishes to control, though is something that ultimately controls him, making him always wonder “what time it was” (94). Franco makes this preoccupation clear in the opening shot of his section: the wristwatch his father gave Quentin is incessantly ticking, growing louder until he destroys it; however, he cannot escape time. Walking down the streets he not only comes across a clock store but hears the overwhelming sound of the town clock in the background. Faulkner presents these “‘time-images’ […] [where] the rational connections between character and space corrode. Action or movement no longer subordinates time” (Nyerges 64).

Franco translates Faulkner’s Modernist “out of time” stream-of-consciousness form through the
layering of silence, sound, and white noise, forcing the viewer to withdraw out of themself.
Franco also uses sound to draw attention to the tension between white colonialism and black presence, particularly through the subtle incorporation of slave and gospel songs, which emphasizes the “spatial dynamic of modern southern racial identity, the at times lethal play of ‘inside and outside’” (Lurie 152). In *As I Lay Dying*, there is a pervasive silence; music only enters in tense orchestral or piano pieces during moments of dramatic tension. There is a dominant use of the sounds of nature—such as the rainfall or the current of the river—but the most notable sounds are of Addie’s coffin construction, what with the “Chuck. Chuck. Chuck.” of the incessant “hammering and sawing” (Faulkner, *Dying* 5, 14).

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the cinematic use of sound largely infringes on narrative territory. While many critics describe Benjy’s capacity as “pre-lingual,” Polk argues that he is “non-lingual: the language of the Benjy section is Faulkner's language” (105). How does Franco navigate this space of silence? He translates Benjy’s incapacity to speak, and the silence forced upon him—“‘Hush [...] They going to hear you’” (Faulkner, *Sound* 47)—through moments of furious sounds or by entirely stripping sound away. Totter notes that “Benjy’s verbal limitations reflect his mental disabilities, that is, to dramatize psychological time,” but also “imitates human consciousness since [...] the mind cannot accommodate itself to mechanical time” (85, 98). In the novel, he is continuously “trying to say” (Faulkner, *Sound* 64) though is always unable to do so, and so Faulkner bridges that gap through writing. In the film, Franco opens up this liminal space, drawing attention to this vulnerability either through intense moments of moaning to exemplify his “savagery,” or scenes where the viewer is looking down upon him screaming without a sound, again taking away his individual agency.
The perpetual dichotomy of sound and silence in Benjy’s character becomes one of the distinct qualities of narrative in Franco’s adaptation of *The Sound and the Fury*. In Faulkner’s novel, Benjy’s narrative section “is almost completely visual, cinematic, and what rolls through his mind is not ‘memory,’ […] but rather more nearly different reels, perhaps, from a movie of his life” (Polk 105). Benjy becomes the “watcher”; while “Benjy don’t talk, […] [he] knows all the same” (*The Sound and the Fury*). His narrative is shaped by the “cinematic reels” he sees, signified by Franco’s artful close-ups on Benjy’s eyes, or the distinct camera manipulation making the audience’s view come from Benjy’s visual perspective. Faulkner emphasizes this proximal distance in the narrative as it is split between dialogue—from which Benjy is excluded—and italics made up of memories and sensory perceptions, making it nearly impossible to separate past and present or reality and imagination. Franco incorporates this tension as a simultaneous crossing between past and present, as well as memory and experience, just as “Faulkner signals these movements through time by using italics, […] represent[ing] images buried in Benjy’s unconscious which then work their way into the front of his conscious life, his own narrative present” (Polk 107). The crossover of flashback is paired with Benjy’s child-like voiceover, particularly the repeated whispering of “she smelled like the trees,” to draw attention to his primordial experience and the way that he is—and always will be—like a “baby” (*The Sound and the Fury*).

As *The Sound and the Fury* is split into four distinct sections—the last of which is from Dilsey’s perspective, another watcher who “seen the beginning, now […] sees the end” (*The Sound and the Fury*)—Franco adapts Faulkner’s narrative form through the use of intertitles. Whereas Faulkner titles his sections by dates, making the narrative’s point-of-view implicit, Franco titles the first three “sections” of his adaptation according to the perceived narrators—
Benjy, Quentin, and Jason. The last, and arguably most important, section from Dilsey’s perspective simply blends into the fade out from Jason’s prior section. The effect of Dilsey’s narrative elimination is two fold. Firstly, Franco seems to do this as a technique of preserving Faulkner’s dominant narratological voice for Dilsey’s section. Second, it adds another layer of silence, further “othering” the watcher and the black servant experience. Franco demonstrates his literary awareness by including an intertitle of the excerpt from Act V, Scene V of *Macbeth* which inspired the novel’s title: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing”.

In both *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, Franco provides an adequate portrayal of the (changing) dialect of the American South, particularly in the wake of modernity, in the high dialect of the once noble Compsons and the rural vulgarity of the Bundrens. Whereas the narrative shift in *The Sound and the Fury* is much easier to trace, the continual narrative shift in *As I Lay Dying* poses a more difficult task for cinematic translation. Franco is tasked with preserving the significance of their individual narratives since “each [story strand] has its own centre of gravity, its own NOW” (Chatman 66). Kawin outlines the various methods to combat this issue of the cinematic translation of subjective first-person narrative: “voice-over, providing what a character says; subjective camera and sound, denoting what a character sees and hears; and windscreen, revealing what a character thinks” (qtd. in Totter 45). Franco employs all of these, and, in terms of language, respects Faulkner’s original narrative by favouring inter-character dialogue, individual monologue (particularly for Cash and Vardamon), and voice-over.
It is impossible to talk about the narrative form of Modernism without acknowledging the role of editing. In literature, Polk says that “to emend toward any form of regularization is to valorize regularity, control, neatness as an aesthetic standard, and to work against the manifest and deliberate untidiness, even tastelessness” (12). Given this critique of editing, paired with Faulkner’s own views on the mechanization of the film industry, one must ask if Franco violates Modernist aesthetics through cinematographic editing. In *As I Lay Dying*, Franco navigates the interconnected narratives by presenting the film entirely in a split screen format. The effect is that the various camera angles give perspective—to both physical and narratological space. Franco opens the film up to challenge the binary of inside and outside. For example, when Addie’s coffin is floating in the river, Franco evokes her invisible yet dominating narrative presence—“just a shape, to fill a lack.” In both film adaptations, Franco employs cross-cut, fade-in and fade-out, and close-up. While “ellipsis is sometimes identified with the ‘cut’ between shots in the cinema,” the use of the cross-cut in *As I Lay Dying* demonstrates the abrupt narratological shifts from the novel, thereby “giving the impression during projection that the first shot is suddenly and instantaneously displaced by the second” (Chatman 71). Franco reserves the close-up for intimate moments with individual characters, particularly in monologues or moments of trauma, which transcends the Modernist notion of interiority. In any case, Franco’s “editing” is not used as a means to displace Faulkner’s Modernist aesthetics; it rather elevates the distortion of time, violating the traditionally sequential cinematic form.

In an interview, Franco once said that Faulkner’s “writing style is so high Modernist it pushes [him] to make very contemporary films”’ (Ouzounian 2). One way that Franco turns Faulkner’s early twentieth-century novels into contemporary pieces is through the artfulness of shot. Nyerges attributes a “slow-motion aesthetic [to] Faulkner’s writing” (63). Franco clearly
demonstrates this aesthetic in the river scene in *As I Lay Dying*, as the “camera eye” deliberately slows down time in the midst of chaos, providing artful overhead pans of the coffin floating down the river, or the rush of the current—the volatile nature of the “dark land.” The angle of the camera in both films is rarely direct; it has a three hundred sixty degree presence to demonstrate the dynamism of character and environment. At times, such as in Benjy’s section, the camera has a blurry or unsteady quality, which gives a Modernist “out of focus” effect. Besides considering the authenticity of Franco’s film direction, it is necessary to address the verisimilitude of his performances. In *As I Lay Dying*, he plays Darl, the “overseer” of the family who falls into madness. This role is not particularly striking: Franco has a lot of screen time and his dialect is the most eloquent of the Bundren family, just as Faulkner writes it to be in the novel. Franco’s role as Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* is, however, notable. Does Franco over-emphasize his “deaf and dumb” (Faulkner, *Sound* 60), infantile “savageness”? Ultimately, no. If anything, Franco provides a humanism that Faulkner fails to translate in Benjy’s section, as while the novel form presents people talking at him, the cinematic form allows for his unutterable response through visual memory and physical presence. It is also notable that the cast of both films largely overlaps, providing a duality of character. In *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, respectively, the repeated cast is as follows: James Franco as Benjy and Darl; Finn Blake Nelson as Jason II and Anse; Ahna O’Reilley as Caddy and Dewey Dell; Scott Haze as Jason IV and Sheet; Logan Marshall-Green as Dalton and Jewel; and Danny McBride in a sheriff cameo and as Vernon. In Faulkner’s mythical Yoknapatawpha County, there are several instances where characters from separate narratives cross paths, and, I think, Franco is playing with the same notion here.
Ultimately, Franco, unlike Ritt, preserves many of the aesthetic qualities of Faulkner’s high Modernist writing. Reviving the Southern Gothic during a turbulent time in modern American society—especially regarding changing notions of race, sexuality, and gender—Franco demonstrates a cinematic articulation of the anxieties surrounding tradition and modernity in the twenty-first century. Whereas Faulkner rejected the consumerist nature of cinematic productions, Franco—though admitting they are not his top priorities—acknowledges the influence of monetary gain and popularity through box office consumerism:

“I’ve worked it out in a way so that my stakes aren’t so high that if [The Sound and the Fury] doesn’t make The Avengers type of box office, which it won’t, it’s still OK. We didn’t spend a whole lot of money. We’ll make enough to make another one” (Ozounian 2)
If Faulkner’s writing is Modernist, then Franco’s adaptations are aesthetically Postmodern. He subverts the mainstream conventions of cinematic form, particularly the camera’s “mechanization” of chronological time, direct narrative, and transparent character. Franco’s preoccupation with Faulkner was short-lived, but provided two consecutive years of artfully directed films just like the back-to-back publications of Faulkner’s novels.
Works Cited


