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## THE CINEMATIC ADAPTATION OF ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*: MOTIFS, REFLECTIONS AND CRITICISM

**Abstract.** The paper provides a critical interpretation of *The English Patient*, both the movie and Michael Ondaatje's novel. Comparing the movie and the original text, the author looks for the reconfigurations that take place in representation of the novel into the visual language. The author searches for references in Herodotus, Boccaccio and in other books that make up the Western canon, while describing the inter-textual level of discourse of the novel within the Hollywood production canons. Having as the main focus the postcolonial discourse of the novel and its disappearance in the entire film, the paper shows how political discourses generate narrative transformations. Developing a critical reception of the fictionalized works, the paper identifies the "moral message", "responsibility", "influence" as key elements in any contemporary fiction productions.

**Key words.** The English Patient, critical interpretation of movies and novels, Michael Ondaatje, political discourse in cinema

### The "double" reception

My critical reception of *The English Patient*, especially the movie, has been in a permanent redefinition and reconfiguration. This was possible due to the fact that I first watched the movie and read the book afterwards. By far, the most important reconfiguration occurred when I saw the movie for the second time, having in mind a complex and well researched re-reading of the book. The second watching of the movie had an irreversible impact on my critical response: I found myself in a difficult situation interpreting every word of the movie in relation with the profound message and construction of the book. In one way, every sentence from the screen seemed to have the impact of a hidden intertextuality, always leading my thoughts to fragments of the book. I realized that the two different aspects of *The English Patient* – the movie and the original text of the book – merged and contaminated each other in my mind,



making any attempt to handle those two aspects in a “pure” consideration very difficult. This could also be due to the fact that the director Anthony Minghella worked together with the author, Michael Ondaatje, on the screenplay.

The aim of this article is to explore the most important aspects of the original text and of the movie in a comparative way, trying to maintain a clear distinction of those two, in order to trace a deep image of the cinematic adaptation of *The English Patient*. The second part of the article deals with the major criticism of the movie, trying to explain the motifs behind those judgments and the impact on the audience, referring not only to the inadvertence between the movie and book, but also to the so called “moral message” of the film.

### **Settings and locations: San Girolamo villa, Tuscany, Cairo, Libyan Desert**

The spatial configuration of the novel and movie is constructed as a permanent peregrination between two important

locations. On the one hand, there is the Tuscany scenery in World War II Italy, characterized by destruction, dangerous roads filled with unexploded mines, military convoys, injured soldiers and a collective wish of the people for the ending of the battles. On the other hand, there is the image of the desert, constructed as an exotic place in order to oppose the war atmosphere in Italy, with many references to the African continent prior to the burst of the Second World War.

Being a postmodernist fiction, *The English Patient* is a novel where the intertextual dimension of the discourse is richly used and explored. There is a permanent reference in the novel to Herodotus's *Histories*, to Kipling's *Kim* and indirectly by space, location, landscape and narrative functions, to Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. The medieval epic opens with a description of the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) that encapsulates the complete chaos of the world: death, destruction, suffering people, lost families. In this case, the only solution to put things in order and to save the plagued world is the ceremony of storytelling. By narrating different stories, the order can



be restored and the world can be saved in an almost magical ceremony. For some critics (Marilyn Adler Papayanis, 2005) the “ruined villa is a synecdoche for European civilization with its now discredited Renaissance and Illumination legacy”. But the reference to the 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian novel is quite abstruse in the movie for an audience unfamiliar with the history of the Western literary canon. What is obvious in this case, even if the original story of *The Decameron* is not recognized, is the importance of this space in the characters’ healing process. The villa is the place where the process of healing begins, both in the book and the film, as the author explained in an interview. He wanted to suggest “an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war, and this was where healing began”.

Another important aspect of the space of the villa is that it has once been used as a hospital and nunnery. There is no coincidence in this fact and, as the author himself pointed out, the humanity needs a general process of healing and redemption. This general process is explored through the four characters of the villa, demonstrating that the only solution of salvation is the simple act of helping others. Hana dedicated her time to the dying English patient, while Caravaggio, who has come there seeking revenge and retribution, accepts that the English patient is not responsible for the tortures he had suffered.

The movie fails to express an important aspect, the fact that the San Girolamo villa subverts the colonial borders and identities through its spatial

configuration. In the novel there is a special attention to the description of this space, pointing out that the borders that once separated one room from another do not function anymore, showing that this space defies the constructed demarcation of the outside world. Even the inside is not completely delimited from the outside: “seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remains of the earth. To Hana the wild gardens were like further rooms” (Ondaatje, 1992). However, in the movie this suggestion is not clear. Here, the villa rather points out a state of complete destroy than a space without borders and limits.

The image of the desert is a recurrent motif in *The English Patient*, crucial for a complete understanding of the internal construction of the novel and film. I have identified three important aspects of the desert in the novel, which have been used as a metaphor in order to deconstruct the colonial realities: the image of the desert meant to deconstruct the European processes of identity configuration, the desert opposed to nationalism and nation states realities and the metaphor of the desert used to subvert the colonial practices such as mapping, naming and locating. (Istudor, 2010)

The interest of Anthony Minghella, the director of *The English Patient*, focuses on the visual image of the desert. The movie starts with a moving shot of this space from the plane, followed by a permanent reconfiguration of the images as the British director pointed out: “the

film in constantly redefining and saying 'This is not what you think.' So it begins with what looks like some sand, then you realize it is a bit of canvas. Then you see a paintbrush appear and that paintbrush starts to make a hieroglyph – but no, it is not a hieroglyph, it is a body. Then that body starts to move and it seems to be with other bodies. Then you realize it's not a body, it's the desert... It's constantly re-defining the image" (Minghella, 1996). In this case, the opening scene of the movie, in which the desert looks so soft that it seems to be a woman's back, perfectly transmits Rufus Cook's idea of a figuratively translation of Katherine's body into the text of the desert, as a marker of the fact that she enters and becomes part of the landscape of the desert. (Cook, 1999).

It is clear that Minghella was not interested in the image of the desert from a postcolonial point of view, but this omission was strongly criticized by Jennifer Jeffers who stated that the director made a "film comfortably into the historical, empire adventure genre" (2006). She even points out an important contrast between the image of the desert from the novel and the reversed effect of the movie on the audience. While in the novel the desert is a space which "erases peoples identities" and which "could not be claimed or owned – it was a piece of cloth carried by the winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names" (Ondaatje, 1992) the film, by contrast, "invites the viewer to share in and enjoy the colonizing discourse

and... became a 'blockbuster' because the viewer was allowed to maintain the privileged white eye of the Western camera" (Jeffers, 2006).

### **Colonialism, post-colonialism and nationalism in *The English patient***

In his book, *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, Terry Eagleton explains how post-colonialism, as a literary theory, emerged from similar positions with feminism and postmodernism and as a consequence of the historical changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the fall of the empires, the decline of the nation-states, the emergence of the multicultural societies and periphery cultures (2008). Of most importance in Eagleton's study is the preoccupation of post-colonialism for concepts such as *space, identity, language, and power*, (Eagleton, 2008) terms which are present in *The English Patient* as important themes for the construction and logic of the novel.

As Linda Hutcheon pointed out, the novel is composed by a "constellation of themes around healing, hurt, burning, and bombing" making it more interesting when those concepts are used "as a metaphor for the complex heritage of colonialism". (Hutcheon, 1993). So, there is an obvious intention of Ondaatje to underline the dangers of the colonial system and to subvert those realities.

One way of opposing those realities, as I mentioned above, is the metaphor of the desert, which is not presented in the movie as it appears in the original structure of the novel. Actually, the movie

ignores many of the subverting ideas of the book, including the attempts of Kirphal, the Indian sapper, to memorize his past in London and his experience as the “other”. Even the fact that he is called Kip suggests his hybrid identity: he is seen as an exotic “product” of the British Empire, who serves in the army for the Allies despite his family’s animosity. The novel consists of two more important chapters where Kirphal’s “London experience” is told, which is very important for the evolution of this “marginalized” character, completely ignored by the British director. It is hard to find a logic explanation for the lack of this information in the movie, which reduces the role of the sapper to a strange, “exotic” presence in the lives of Hana and Caravaggio, but the consequences are felt at the audience’s level. For a specialized viewer, familiar with the narrative construction of the novel, this omission is intrusive and could denote superficiality. Which then could be the effect of this omission on the “virgin”<sup>1</sup> viewer? In order to answer this question we should take into consideration Edward Said’s theory about “Orientalism” and the image of the “Other” in the European perspective. According to Said (2001) the Orient is an European invention in which the image of the “Other” is associated with exoticism, remarkable experiences, obsessive memories and landscapes. In the same

manner, in the film, Kirphal is portrayed in terms of exoticism, distinctiveness and peculiarity, whilst Ondaatje’s intention is to deconstruct this stereotype and give the character a chance to “speak for itself”. In this way, the effect on the “virgin” viewer is the perpetuation of this stereotyped image of the Orientals.

The preoccupation for colonial dangers is also pointed out in the book through the importance of mapping and naming places. The reference to those actions is reduced in the movie, but it emphasizes the counter-nationalist discourse. In a moment of supreme anger, Almásy sums up the realities of that era in the scene of the International Sand Club meeting. For him there is no difference between fascism and the politics of the British Empire: “His Majesty! Der Führer! Il Duce!” pointing out that all those three mentioned above are symbols of an unproductive way of thinking. Even his adulterous relation with Katherine could be interpreted as a method to subvert the classic ideal of marriage which appears in the novel in terms of identity politics. Marriage is vital for every nation, because it is associated with the idea of producing “children for the sake of an arbitrarily imagined national community” (Hsuan Hsu, 2005) while the illegal relation of the two is assumed as a personal choice, violation of the social laws and undesirable for the nation. However, in the film, because Minghella chose “to elevate the romance between Count Laszlo de Almásy and the married Katherine Clifton, making it serve as

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1 I use the term “virgin” to describe a viewer who did not read the book and his perception is based only on the movie.

the film's principal story" (Kosovsky, 2005) their adulterous relationship is not portrayed as a danger to the marital institution.

In contrast, the main interpretation suggested in the movie concerning the relation between Almásy and Katherine is put in terms of "either to betray his country or break his sacred promise to his beloved. Here love and patriotism is in conflict" (Grodal, 2004) an old idea which has been explored in the past in other Hollywood films such as *Casablanca* or *Double Indemnity*.

The movie is also contaminated with the Hollywood genre language, as John C. Eisele suggested (2002), aspect that is illustrated in one of the most brutal and cruel scene of the novel and film: the amputation of Caravaggio's fingers. In the novel, the loss of fingers is explained by a sexual escapade that Caravaggio had with an Italian woman and the amputation is performed by an Italian nurse by orders of an Italian. This detail is replaced in the movie by a Hollywood stereotype procedure: the amputation is done by an Arab woman by the orders of a Nazi officer. The explanation given by Eisele who points out that "often there is the threat of amputation of a hand with reference to the Islamic legal prescription to cut off the hands of thieves, a practice whose application has been rather selective through the centuries and only rarely occurs today. Nevertheless, this is one of the most potent images in the Hollywood Oriental archive and it is exploited to the hilt even in the most incidental ways" (2002).

### **From an "innocent" romance to a major criticism of *The English Patient***

The following section aims to present and discuss the major criticism of the film, focusing on those ideas which emphasize the "unreliable" message of the movie and not the inadvertences between the original text and the cinematic adaptation.

After its release in theatres in 1996, *The English Patient* soon became a very popular film, winning seven Academy Awards. The interest for Almásy's story rapidly arose and many people started to search for more information about the destiny of the Hungarian count and explorer of the desert.

The major controversy arisen by the movie is related to the connections of Almásy with the Nazis. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek first investigated the story of the real Count Almásy, trying to compare the events that are presented in the novel and film with the historical facts about the Hungarian count (2005). He backs Elizabeth Salett's position which concludes that "*The English Patient* calls itself a work of fiction. But in fact, what the film director-writer does is to take a real story and a real person, minimizing the meaning of his activities and recast him as a passionate loving hero. *The English Patient*, which was constructed as a beautiful, romantically lyrical film, is amoral and ahistorical. The film's presentation of a moral equivalency between the German and the Allies trivializes the significance of the choices men like Almásy made and the enormous consequences of their actions and

alliances” (1996). This is the traditional position of a journalist, always interested in the “authentic” facts of a literary work and from this point of view the criticism of Salett is logic and understandable. However, I question the attention of this journalist to the true “message” of the film and book. Ondaatje is not interested in his book in sympathizing with the Nazis or the Allies. In fact, both military blocks are blamed for their crimes. In the movie one of the most brutal scenes has as protagonist a Nazi officer, while in the book the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are described as one of the biggest crimes in modern history. So, there is no intention of making a positive portrait of the Nazis or the Allies. In fact, one important argument in order to deconstruct the criticism of Elizabeth Salett is the counter-nationalistic aspect of the novel and film. Almásy is considered a traitor only in the terms of nationalism, a concept that is seen by Ondaatje as the source of the war. More than that, Almásy’s choices are dictated by his love for Katherine and her wish not to die alone in the Cave of Swimmers.

Michael Ondaatje responded to the criticism of the so called “ethical dimensions” suggested by Salett, in a letter to *The Globe and Mail*. I will reproduce, in the following, the exact words of the writer, because they are crucial for the understanding of the criticism of *The English Patient*:

From Homer to *Richard III* to the present, literature has based its imaginative stories on historical event. We read those

epics and literary works to discover, not the facts of the Trojan War, but the human emotions discovered in the story. If one writes a novel and pretends it is nonfiction or makes a film and pretends it is a documentary, then the writer or filmmaker should be tested. However, *The English Patient* came out a few years ago as a novel and the film version is not a documentary. I wrote about an enigmatic desert explorer whose role when World War II broke out was to be a betrayer. In reality the facts are still murky and still uncertain—to some historians he was a spy, some others think he was a double agent. Whatever “spying” he did was witnessed and watched by the British Secret Service. *The English Patient* is not a history lesson but an interpretation of human emotions—love, desire, betrayals in war and betrayals in peace—in a historical time. It holds no sympathy for Nazis, in fact the most shocking scene in the film depicts a Nazi torture. It is about forgiveness, how people come out of a war. There are four other central characters who reflect and qualify the character of Almásy. The facts of the history behind *The Crucible* or *Richard III* is the raw material often chronicled by historians with a political dogma or party line to protect. Some are true, some are false. (Compare the histories of the War of the Roses or the Second World War written at the time and those written now and they still continue to be revised.) It is what Shakespeare or Arthur Miller have written out of it that teaches us about the human condition. If a novelist or dramatist or filmmaker is

to be censored or factually tested every time he or she writes from historical event, then this will result in the most uninspired works, or it just might be safer for those artists to resort to cartoons and fantasy”.

The two positions have implications not only on this particular film and novel, but they also question the whole idea of the historical fiction and characters, as Ondaatje underlines. It is true that in a world of a global screen the importance of popular culture and Hollywood productions is questionable and the message of these productions needs special attention, but if we censor every non-accurate version of history in literature than we will be in the impossibility of talking about historical fiction, novel and films.

Steven de Zepetnek also criticizes the position of Anthony Minghella and Ondaatje concluding that “it is a mystery to me why Ondaatje and Minghella would not anticipate and consequently attempt to preempt storm that erupted with the release of the film” (p. 124). In reality, the “eruption” was anticipated because at the end of the movie there is an important observation, unusual for a fictionalized work, but necessary from the point of view of the film makers: “while a number of the characters who appear in this film are based on historical figures, and while many of the areas described – such as the Cave of Swimmers and its surrounding desert – exist and where explored in the 1930’s it is important to stress that this story is a fiction and that the portraits

of the characters who appear in it are fictional as are some of the events and journeys” (2006). This is not a traditional message for a moving picture and it was introduced in order to preempt some criticism mentioned above. Usually, it is very clear that every artistic film is a fiction story and a message that says the film was inspired by true facts is shown at the end.

The debate arisen by the movie release shows us an important trend in the critical receptions of the fictionalized work nowadays: “we are in politics” (Spivak, 2005). The whole discussion around an artistic work always encapsulates a political discourse, which sometimes undermines the aesthetic implications of a book or novel.

### Conclusions

The cinematic adaptation of *The English Patient* centers the whole story around the relationship between Almásy and Katherine, dealing with aspects of love, desire, difficult choices and betrayals. The postcolonial discourse of the novel is almost absent during the entire film. Although there are several inter-textualities in the film, it is quite difficult for an inexperienced audience to see the main point. In fact, the inter-textual discourse of the novel always refers to two important literary works of the Western canon: Herodotus’s *Histories* and Kipling’s *Kim*. Those two books express the historical fiction and the colonial realities of the novel that Ondaatje wants to deconstruct. However,

the movie symbolically explores only the *Histories*, forgetting about *Kim*. This explains why the image of the desert is outstandingly created in the movie, conquering the audiences through the visual power of the sand dunes.

The criticism of the movie is an example of how interpretation arises today

in the artistic work, underlining that we are living in a cultural background dominated by political discourses and approaches. Words like “moral message”, “responsibility”, “influence” tend to characterize any approach of a fictionalized book or film.

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