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(eds.)

Screening and Depicting
Cultural Diversity
in the English-speaking
World and Beyond



Identity and Alterity in Post-colonial Film Versions: *A Passage to India* and *Apocalypse Now*

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Film and the Novel

Moving pictures are, as James Monaco writes in his seminal study *How to Read a Film. The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia*,

at first glance most closely parallel to the pictorial arts. Until quite recently, film could compete directly with painting only to a limited extent; it wasn't until the late 1960s that film color was sophisticated enough to be considered more than marginally useful as a tool. Despite this severe limitation, the effects of photography and film were felt almost immediately, for the technological media were clearly seen to surpass painting and drawing in one admittedly limited but nevertheless vital respect: they could record images of the world directly. (39)

With this development of the moving images, the perception of reality changed drastically, because the principle of *mimesis* lost its weight. During the 19th century, when the art of photography allowed the infinite reproduction of images and portraits, painters moved away from *mimesis* and towards a more sophisticated expression. They were now free from the duty to imitate reality and able to explore more fully the structure of their art. This change also affected the art of narration because writers began to reflect more intensely on their art, the aim of which was no longer to represent reality.

In this concern, novels and films differ greatly although they both belong to the epical genre of art. When we look at filmed novels such as those in this paper, E. M. Forster's (1879-1970) topical post-colonial novel *A Passage to India* (1924) and Joseph Conrad's (1857-1924) symbolic tale *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which was turned into the expressive anti-war movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by the American film director Francis Ford Coppola, we become aware of distinctive features of filmed novels which strongly influence the perspectives according to which the readers and spectators look at these films not only because of the specific political backgrounds but also because of the change of perspectives which are necessarily conditioned by the genre-related techniques of the narration.

These can be briefly summarized as the following: (see Monaco, 45ff)
Both films and novels tell long stories with a wealth of detail applying the perspective of a narrator, who often interposes a resonant level of irony between the story and the observer. Whatever can be told in print in a novel, can also be roughly pictured or told in film.

There are however obvious and powerful differences between pictorial narration and linguistic rendering. For one thing, film operates in real time; it is more limited than linguistic narration. Film is generally restricted to what Shakespeare in his "Prologue" (l.12) to *Romeo and Juliet* calls "the short two hours' traffic of our stage." So film shares this restriction with the dramatic art.

Although film is limited to a shorter narration, it naturally has pictorial possibilities the novel does not. What cannot be transferred by incident might be translated into image. This induces the most essential difference between the two forms of narration.

Since novels are told by the author or the narrator, we see and hear only what he wants us to see and hear. Films are more or less told by their authors too, but we see and hear a great deal more than their director necessarily intends. It would be an absurd and rather impossible task for a novelist to try to describe a scene in as much detail as is conveyed in cinema. With film we have a certain amount of freedom to choose from the well of details and are also forced by the shortage of time to select one detail rather than another. Whatever the novelist describes is filtered through his language, his prejudices and his point of view.

The driving tension of the novel is the relationship between the material of the story (plot, character, setting, theme etc.) and the narration in language, i.e. between the tale and the teller. The driving tension of film, on the other hand, is between the materials of the story and the objective nature of the image. So the observer always has to relate the image to the outer world of his experience. In film, chance plays a much larger part because of the fast flow of time, and the end result is that the observer is free to participate in the experience much more actively. Therefore film is a much richer experience because the image on the screen continually changes as we redirect our attention.

On the other hand the experience of a film is so much poorer, because the *persona* of the director is so much weaker. Film can approximate the ironies that the novel develops in narration, but it can never duplicate them. That is why the modern era responded to this challenge of film by expanding attention to just this area: the subtle, complex ironies of narration. We will see that the two films in question thus mainly differ in this concern because *A Passage to India* closely relates the narrative original whereas *Apocalypse Now* is much freer in establishing new ironies and discrepancies in a post-modern sense than its model does.

Finally, one of the greatest assets of the novel is its ability to manipulate words, above all in modern narrations after the mimetic desire was reduced. Since films play with images rather than words, they do not dispose of such a vast profusion of words and never with the concrete insistence of the printed page. In this self-reflexive trend the novel approaches poetry as it redoubles its attention on itself and celebrates its material, which is obviously language or more generally artistic expression.

The Clashes between Two Cultures

Post-colonial Discourse

Ethnicity, hybridity and indigenusness have among others become keywords in the colonial and postcolonial discourses of the last two decades. They represent concepts and mentalities of the space “in-between,” i.e. cultural entities which have arisen since the decline of the British Empire during the post-war period in the 20th century. At the same time they are opposed to the idea of Englishness which held the British Empire together and which has become a most questionable label even in the heartland of the British Isles themselves. In her introduction to *Empire Writing*, Elleke Boehmer confirms that “a strong feeling to develop literary and cultural traditions” manifests itself in the colonies in order to give “form and significance to newly emergent nationalist feelings” (Boehmer, 1998, 34. See also Young). On the other hand, the notion of Englishness which in the days of colonial writing had become a “privileging norm” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 3) can be considered as the opposite ideology which attracts a high degree of attention. Even within English cultural criticism, Englishness has become a debatable subject which raises doubts about its stringency with English intellectuals. Jeremy Paxman opens his bitter self-scrutiny of the English mentality and his attack on its everyday complacency with the revealing sentence: “Being English used to be so easy” (Paxman, 9). Englishness is supposed to denote a national character of the English which makes them distinctive from other groups of people.¹ What are these distinctive traits which have come down to us from the late 19th century?

In Victorian times an imperialistic attitude was considered to be universal. This ambition was legitimized by a “God-ordained duty to go out and colonize those places unfortunate enough not to have been born under the flag” (Paxman, 65). The British Empire was a sign from God to indicate the superiority of the race against the inferiority of other races. That is why the English regarded it as their duty “to undertake the government of vast, uncivilised populations and to raise them gradually to a higher level of life” (*ibid.*, 69).

This messianic consciousness is linked to a strong national feeling and to national values, which implies a fear of foreign influences and of an alienation from one’s homeland by unfamiliar sentiments.

The national character creates a conformity of behaviour and of roles which lead to a certain uniformity and in-group cohesion. The pressure exerted by this kind of cohesion becomes all the more stringent when the persons involved are

1 “Englishness is the attribution of characteristics, habits, customs and traditions to the English as a people which makes them distinctive from other groups of people” (Scheunemann, 11).

displaced from home and are dangerously exposed to a foreign country. Then the reaction increases by stereotypical violence and routine conventions which can above all be observed in far-away colonies and territories.

So the typical Englishman is dependent on rationality and unemotionality which had come down to him from the Puritan heritage of the 17th century. It was subsequently further strengthened in the age of reason prevailing in the 18th century.

These national features are illustrated in the inventory of people in the novel, whom we will look at more closely in the following.

The Stereotypical Oppositions of Englishness and the Indian National Character

Published in 1924, *A Passage to India* is set in early 20th century in India, in the city of Chandrapore and in the neighbouring Marabar Hills. E. M. Forster based his novel on material he collected on his first two visits to India in 1912-13 and in 1921. In political terms the novel is pre-1914, but due to the different times of composition it displays a mixture of periods.

The novel is subdivided in a dialectical form into three parts according to the places where the action is laid, i.e. in "Mosque," "Caves" and "Temple." The title is derived from a poem by Walt Whitman, in which the American poet hails the construction of the Suez Canal as a symbol of a new era dominated by technological progress as a guarantee of peace and harmony. Forster's novel can be read as a satirical answer to and a sceptical commentary on this vision. Within these foreign surroundings the English nationals have to overcome an alienating awareness.

Ronny Heaslop as English colonizer and officer has to follow the rules of law and order, whereas his fiancée Adela Quested who has come all the way from home on board a steamer with his mother Mrs. Moore feels estranged not only in her social role but also in the unfamiliar cultural context. Adela, who tries to be ascertained in her plan to be married to Ronny, encounters some comprehension of her ambivalent and vague personal situation only from Cyril Fielding, the English teacher who is best accustomed to the Indian character. On the other hand, Dr. Aziz, the Indian doctor, is the only person on the opposite side who is able to bridge the gap between the two cultures and who makes some vain efforts to reconcile the opposing sides by his understanding behaviour. He is surrounded by a group of Hindus and Muslims who display little knowledge of European views and who adhere to an irrational Indian heritage impenetrable to the English mind. Also the English social military order governed by strict legal regulations stands in stark contrast to the indigenous chaos and mystical irrationality which rules the native Indians. To the enlightened European observer this Indianness defies any definition. Among these Indian personalities only Dr. Godbole, a

Brahman priest, speaks out for his ethnic group and expounds what their leading principles are. So he is a kind of interpreter between his Indian countrymen and the English colonizers.

Englishness in the Film Version of *A Passage to India*

In 1984, David Lean presented a film version of the novel with Judy Davis as Adela Quested and Peggy Ashcroft as her mother-in-law. James Fox as Ronny Heaslop and Victor Banerjee as Dr. Aziz are the male counterparts, while Alec Guinness assumes the mysterious and contradictory role of the Indian priest Dr. Godbole. The most impressive mass scenes of the Indian populace who fill the dusty public places and bewilder the European observer by their chaotic and archaic behaviour.

The visual component of the film underscores several features of Englishness which are less obvious in the novel but strike the observer by their apparent visibility in the film. The opening scenes are focussed on the technological progress in England and in India by the journey of the English ladies to the Indian subcontinent. The railway, the obvious symbol of the Industrial Revolution, was introduced to India from 1853 onwards and reached a length of c. 40,000 km some 40 years later and some 72,000 km before India was granted independence in the middle of the 20th century (see Headrick, 55). Even today the Indian railway network is the fourth largest in the world. This massive investment of some 200 million pounds was very important from a political and military point of view because the railway system guaranteed “a military measure for the better security with less outlay” and in economic terms it allowed “lower costs, higher speeds, and greater reliability” (*ibid.*, 59, 51). These achievements were extensively used by the English occupants, who also relished the sleeper compartments and the restaurant service on their overnight journeys. The hard seats of the fourth class were however overcrowded by the Indian natives, who had to make do with the less developed amenities of waggons. Even today these harsh conditions on Indian trains with many passengers hanging on the outside doors are very conspicuous to the foreign visitor on the trunk lines.

The second feature of the Indian character can be detected from the nature-nurture debate. This discrepancy is visible from the orderly habitats of the English in contrast to the archaic and simple conditions of life of the Indians. The genetic heritage of the colonizers allows them to live in highly developed surroundings whereas the indigenous people are dominated by superstitions and archaic living quarters. The intellectual standard of the English unfolds a sophisticated organization of their life. The dangerous contrast of these two sides of civilized life is demonstrated during the visit to the Marabar Caves, when the Indian Dr. Aziz is wrongly attracted by Adela to one of the caves. In the darkness of this uncivilized setting, Adela’s imagination turns into a hallucination when she,

under the stress of the Indian natural heat, dreams of a love affair. Her sudden escape and her report of an attempt by Dr. Aziz to harrass her sexually lead to a court trial during which she decides to revoke her accusations. Her moral defeat is celebrated by the Indians in a hilarious and unruly feast, which again illustrates the harsh contrast of the two cultures. Deeply disappointed by English culture, Dr. Aziz finally refuses the reconciliatory hand of the English teacher Cyril Fielding, stating that, on the basis of these experiences, East cannot meet West – a statement which some sixty years later was to be repeated by the Indian writer Salman Rushdie.

These contrastive elements are very impressively illustrated in the central scenes of the film.

The Film Version of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1898)

The End of the *Pax Americana*

If *A Passage to India* signals the end of English dominion in the East in an early phase of the 20th century, the film version of the Conradian novel *Heart of Darkness* takes the development of decolonization a step further by choosing the Vietnam War in the second half of the 20th century as the end of the *Pax Americana*. *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and its expanded version *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001), both by the American film director Francis Ford Coppola, mark a new variety of the anti-war film which connects the political justification of the Vietnam War with legal issues of political power and cultural supremacy. In our context I would like to connect the relations between law and equity with the various supplementary relations between dominant and marginal discourses, colonial and postcolonial stories, or included and excluded voices. Literary as well as non-literary rhetoric grows out of a particular place and time. Therefore literature may not provide minorities with an absolute sense of justice, or represent an openness of justice regarding inequities committed by legal exclusions.

Among many others, the fiction of Joseph Conrad is a case in point. Above all in his narratives *Lord Jim* (1900) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899-1900), Conrad explores contexts in which the law's exemplary economy of norms and precedents may turn out to be paradoxical. Here he raises the question of excess in terms of the question as to how much the internalization of guilt in self-imposed isolation is indebted to the very legal assumptions about personality that cause conscience to operate. This presence of guilt-as-indebtedness in his fiction reflects an affinity, unintended by many of his characters, between the renunciation of norms or customs and the alienation from intimacy and social bonds.

According to Elleke Boehmer, Conrad is preoccupied with "colonialist writing under high imperialism" because he shows the consequences of