

## **“INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND THE CINEMA: A HISTORICAL- GEOGRAPHICAL-LITERARY-PHILOSOPHICAL-SOCIOLOGICAL- POETICAL VIEW OF THE FILM, *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*”**

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### **Abstract:**

The importance of an interdisciplinary perspective is demonstrated by way of a reading of the film *The English Patient* [Dir. Anthony Minghella, 1996]. The film is born in literature as it is based on a novel by the brilliant Michael Ondaatje. It is historical [Herodotus to World War II]; while demanding knowledge of ‘Middle-Eastern’ geographies; involves a sociology of race and gender relations; while being cinematographically philosophical and deeply poetic. What my paper “does” with *The English Patient* is to stress that without an interdisciplinary perspective the film is devoid of deeper meanings on several levels. Specifically, I address some of these meanings with extensive reference to two vital interdisciplinary concepts key to the film: ‘reversibility’ and ‘the other’. ‘Reversibility’ (the notion that all empires eventually fall or that all systems contain the means and mechanisms of their eventual undoing), and ‘the other’ (a concept of no mean import in a broad range of studies today) focuses on the positive outcome of the fact that we are all other to each other. I conclude that those who lament the disappearance of poetry in our time would do well to look for it, through interdisciplinary lenses, in contemporary cinema such as *The English Patient*.

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**Key Words:** Cinema, Interdisciplinarity, Reversibility, Poetics

### **Introduction:**

*The English Patient* is a film that respects its audience and the more interdisciplinary our background the better prepared we are to deserve its depth and beauty. It is a demanding film, not at all preachy, not at all predictable, it is subtle and it is refined. It calls upon some of the more precious precincts of our imagination: the geographical imagination in both the love of deserts and of bodies; the sociological imagination and its disinclination to love war; the philosophical imagination’s desire for wisdom, and the poetic imagination’s quest for beauty in both dialogue and in images. The result is a film that is exquisite to look at while we are immersed in the intelligence and complexity of its dialogue [often told by way of ‘flashbacks’]. In the end we have a film that renders a philosophical assessment of the world. Two of the pillars of its judgements rest on our understanding of ‘reversibility’ and ‘the other’.

### **Main Text:**

We first meet reversibility (or reversion) in Herodotus’ *The Histories* where, at several junctures, the ‘father’ of history draws our attention to magnificent examples of reversibility. All systems create, through their very functioning, events which lead to the reversal of the system (Baudrillard, 2005b:127). Herodotus points to the fall of great empires which fall under the power of what had previously been lesser entities: “For those that were great long ago, the majority of them have become small, and those that are in my time great were small before... human happiness never remains long in the same place (Herodotus, Book I, Section 5). Reversibility is by no means a determinist concept, for Herodotus or for me, it is more akin to a rule of the game of life: “...you must realize that there is a cycle of human experience: as it goes around it does not allow the same men always to succeed (Herodotus, Book I, Section 207).

Similarly, in our world today, it is the very strength and success of the digital networks which computing requires to thrive, in which the computer virus also proliferates. The antibiotics devised to keep us healthy also allow viruses to grow strong and resistant to drug treatments. Reversibility is then a strong antidote to determinism and linear theories of progress. In our time, reversibility may

well be what will replace dialectics. Ethics and morality are often deeply troubled at the appearance of the reversible because both depend, perhaps much more than they prefer to admit, on the idea of progress. If we accept reversibility as a hypothesis we come to understand that everything which is, is the result of prior reversals and will, in time, have to make way for future reversions. During the peak years of Modernity irreversibility (notions of endless progress as the rule) came to the fore. Today, in our interdisciplinary (postmodern, postcolonial and poststructural time), reversibility reasserts itself as the primary rule. *The English Patient* [both the novel and the film], is the outcome of a kind of reversibility against modernity's confidence in the narrative, and faith in those at the centre to sustain their position. But ours is a time when the old centre finds itself marginalized and the formerly marginalized occupy some of its former (now fluid) space.

Beyond the historical dimensions of reversibility there is a geographical component in this film. Minghella's film (based on Michael Ondaatje's novel) announces reversibility as one of its major theses by opening with a low flying shot over the desert. The desert is the scene of the world's ultimate reversibility – the return to dust. Human geographies of the body are also very much at work as the desert is a vast space of desire which denies us so much for what it offers in return. The desert we are shown in the opening shot is beautiful and poetic – the dunes stretch out across the wide screen like a series of entangled erotic human forms. The desert, always shifting, appears in this sequence like the smooth backs of women and their many lovers row on row on row. It is an immediate and compelling image of renunciation of traditional stories dealing with the events of war which open with lines of trenches, rows of crosses, or some prosaic moment during boot camp.

The principle borders in the desert are mental ones – this it shares with the sky. It is in the desert that we face our innermost self and thought processes and where we learn that in our ability to think and imagine lay the origin of both philosophy and the world. We pass through centuries and wars and artificial lines on maps as the shadow of the airplane piloted by Count Almásy passes over the desert. The sociological dimension appears here as Minghella's desert represents a rapturous critique of human culture and society – its traditions and its rules. We go there to make war but the desert is as indifferent to us as is the rest of the universe – it does not care how we live or die. For a time Almásy appears strong, his own indifference matching that of the desert but a strong woman (Katherine), becomes the vehicle of his reversion. The desert in this film allows Minghella to imagine the world in our absence – the absence of countries, war, and predictable heroes. It is an ideal setting to introduce a film in which those who are usually marginal characters occupy the centre of the story: A nurse from Canada, whose name Hana (Juliette Binoche), the child of immigrants; a Sikh (Kip Singh) who is a British soldier trained to defuse bombs and mines; an East European, Count Lazlo Almásy (Ralph Fiennes) who is anything but the wretched prisoner of war that East Europeans are typically cast as in films concerning this period and the war; a powerful woman, Katherine Clifton (Kristen Scott Thomas), a beautiful woman who plays perhaps the most masculine role of the major cast members. Recall the bathtub scene where she slides in behind Almásy, wrapping him in her legs and arms in a gesture of her complete power over him and the reversal of the traditional male female roles.

Ondaatje's characters, woven together as they are in Minghella's film, are an interdisciplinary way of imagining the very different story of the war years and its simple heroes than the ones Ondaatje heard during his youth in Sri Lanka. This is a romantic story but it is one in the most cruel sense [not the Hollywood sense], and it is a poetic and imaginative portrait of the intimacies of a series of events which would have been so different if written as their traditional others have, as a rule, been.

The literary dimension deepens when we consider that many who have written about this film have been diverted by the question of Minghella's fidelity (or lack thereof) to Ondaatje's novel. In our poststructural times, with the decentering of truth and textual authority, this can only be considered an embarrassing approach. We might as well ask questions concerning the novel's fidelity to the film. I am content that the film and the novel work to destabilize each other and that Ondaatje and Minghella provide a dual text with which usher new characters in from the cinema's traditional margins. In the film we are given two hours and forty-two minutes to think about one of the novel's primary lessons: that we are all other to each other and that otherness is extremely complex.

Indeed, otherness is this very idea which produced the climate in which Ondaatje and Minghella embrace liquidity, and eschew the classical Hollywood romance and the pathetic idea of realism upon which that shaky edifice has long stood. The philosophical dimension of the film deepens when we consider that it is Nietzsche's notion, that the real is merely illusion which has yet to be understood to be illusion, has worked its own reversibility against 19<sup>th</sup> century thought. Ondaatje and Minghella each bring this idea up to their own time as an understanding that the real remains hidden behind appearances (Baudrillard). There could be no better settings for this fundamental human problem to be apprehended than the desert and a war torn part of Europe (Tuscany).

*The English Patient* weaves an alternating pattern of events before, during, and after the war. The film operates with an understanding that time (and all we may ever expect of time is reversibility), wastes us. While we try to transcend the lines on a map we can neither conquer nor evade time. The fragility of the human in the face of time is made all the more visceral by the desert. This film is sensitive to the fact that we gauge time through the faces of others those bodies we have entered and swam up like rivers (Katherine's dying words). The other is also the scene of the enactment of reversibility in this story: a Bedouin healer, strong women, and a traditional subaltern in possession of superior character (Kip). We have long known that war makes men weak and women strong (as it does Catherine and Hana), but in this story Kip endures his test better than his male counterparts. This film does not mourn a dead otherness but celebrates its living forms in all their difficulty.

Otherness in this film is not about opposability as much as it is about the incompatible and it circulates in the fashion of complicity, intersecting at several points with the rawest of emotion. Otherness thrives among the incomparable and when it is denied it returns as hatred. This film reminds us at every return that most of its type have historically tried to exterminate the other *The English Patient* is a testimony to the indestructibility of the other (and the novel is an even stronger statement of this). Everywhere today otherness is taking its revenge and *The English Patient* played a key role, among large budget films with star casts, in ending the cinematic denial of otherness. Prior to this film such portrayals of otherness outside of marginal cinema seemed unimaginable. In traditional films about this time and place, and the war, those who here play the central roles the traditional others would have been cast as merely different a powerful kind of difference which destroys otherness (Baudrillard, 1993c:127). This story is about the hard, cruelties of otherness in all of its indestructibility. Ondaatje and Minghella each understand that the other cannot appear until those who have long occupied the centre disappear. Almásy stands in for the traditional occupants of the centre his return from amnesia is also the awakening of a man into a world where margin and centre no longer exist as specifiable boundaries. In the desert such concepts disappear silently into the sand or are strewn about by the wind as they did in war ravaged Tuscany where he makes his return to himself.

*The English Patient* reminds us that no matter how powerful the conquest, how vicious the extermination, the racism, and the intolerance – that the other survives everything and eventually forces a way in from the margins. It reminds us that reversibility is the only indestructible thing along with challenge. In the case of this kind of film the return of the repressed the other allows us not to go on repeating ourselves (and our traditional war films) forever (Baudrillard, 1993c:146, 174; 2005:204).

The radical other is the person who can exist perfectly well without their former masters as do Kip, Hana, and Katherine in this story. Their lives do not lack traditional cinema and its predictable roles for them as extras and as subaltern. These characters represent the right to claim otherness and as long as there is true otherness (not mere difference) then racism and sexism are denied. If these characters were merely different they would be incorporated into a discourse from which they could be ranked and excluded. They are so fresh and different in their complexity, and in their filmic time (the 1990s), because they command the discourse.

And so the subaltern does not appear in *The English Patient* – not as subaltern. This film was one moment in the history of cinema turning its gaze upon itself, having become fatigued, and seeking new stories. Like every system, the system of film is susceptible to reversion. And it is the reverse of what we might have traditionally expected and everything makes perfect sense and becomes a source

of poetic enjoyment. An English patient who isn't English who finds out as the film unfolds who he is. While he slept the world has changed he awakes to find himself dying with the other the boy, and a woman, have overtaken his story. The English patient who isn't English is the history of cinema (cinema as we thought we knew it) stretched out and dying. Katherine, the woman versed in Herodotus, was his angel of death. It is she who this story is about in so many ways as it is she that ushers in the era of the other.

The concept of history is historical and Ondaatje's novel takes the place of Herodotus's collection of stories the original kind of history in which the author uses characters to tell the story he wants to tell for diverse and particular effects. This is a beautiful form of something we have only recently embraced – the disappearance of history. Minghella takes full advantage of the fact that cinema now has a wider and more powerful reach on populations than do historians. Film has replaced history – the history that replaced Herodotus. Ninety percent of humanity, all those traditional others and subalterns, live without history and always have. History is a kind of luxury the West has afforded itself it is not the history of the other and this is not a film about that history. For Herodotus, Minghella and Ondaatje, history is a great toy (see Baudrillard, 1987:134; 1998:21). Minghella and Ondaatje may well be pointing to a time when only a Herodotus will hold the historical imagination of the public our time. Like Almásy we are less interested in history with known dates than in the kind he finds in the cave of the swimmers where conjecture and imagination are essential to telling a story.

We shall never find our way back to history prior to cinema, and *The English Patient* is evidence that this is not a bad thing. The other is not locked into predictable historical categories without desire. The world, like this film, if we take it as we find it, has no history beyond the fragments we assemble in particular ways for specific purposes.

*The English Patient* works so well in our interdisciplinary times because one of its main characters, Herodotus, has a sense of reciprocal action built into his understanding of the history of the world. It is this sense, played out in forms we can understand as reversibility, by the master story teller Ondaatje, and filmmaker Minghella, that rings so clearly to our contemporary ear. Since Herodotus's time, reversibility has always stood in for justice which humans rarely know through any other experience. One of the next great films to fall across the screen will be one which tells this story as well as *The English Patient* does its own. It will be a film which, like Herodotus, continues the struggle to understand the reversibility that is built into the world as is the alternation of day and night, and the cycle of the seasons. Minghella's achievement has been to show us that the filmmaker has as much of a claim to this role in society as does the historian. Cinema is a century old but in many ways it is just beginning to understand its possibilities.

### **Conclusion:**

Those who lament the disappearance of poetry in our time would do well to look for its reappearance as cinema (Kieslowski's *Blue*, Minghella's *The English Patient*). Poetry was once a place for the irruption of the body into the repressive interiorised space of language (Baudrillard, 1993a:234) and today, as visual languages become increasingly important, we find poetry (once oral, then written) moving increasingly into the visual.

We should also keep in mind, of course, that with the passage of time new reversals are the only thing we can expect with any assurance. Let us hope we can look forward to more films which bring to us the poetry of reversibility as it involves the other. This seems to be *The English Patient*'s lasting gift despite the fact that people who have studied and written about the film for over a decade have entirely missed this point. It is far from a perfect film but it is a film rich in the poetry of reversibility and the Other. It not only takes an interdisciplinary approach to appreciate this film – it took one to make it.

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