THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS IN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF LITERARY TEXTS:
The Case of *The Comfort of Strangers*

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ABSTRACT: European auteur cinema has frequently relied on adapting qualitatively superior literary texts into screenplays. Moreover, with the advent of digital film, the modes of reception of literature and film converge and are increasingly characterized by the principles of hermeneutics and its circular, and cyclical, process of analysis. In the present study, we explore both the similarities in the artistic processes of creating fiction on the page and on the screen, as well as the transformations necessary in the process of adapting literature to film. Basing our analysis on critical concepts such as Lubbock's showing vs telling, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Brian Jarvis's observations on the literary *leitmotif* of walking and watching, we strive to show how novelist and filmmaker choose divergent strategies to achieve similar effects.

McEwan's strategy rests on a disorienting narrative set in an incomprehensible foreign city conveyed to the reader through the conscience of the emotionally alienated characters. The cultural connotations toy with, yet ultimately defy, a clear identification with the actual city of Venice. Conversely, the filmmakers - clearly unwilling to sacrifice the dramatic potential and the recognizablility of Venice - choose to deploy a strategy that relies on cultural connotation as well. However, in contrast to McEwan's geographical and cultural opacity, Schrader achieves a similar effect by generating an audiovisual concept (employing both music and mise-en-scène) that places Robert and Mary's Venetian house at the center of an alien, labyrinthine twilight-zone, a kind of orientalized, ritualized domain which inexorably becomes the venue of a pagan ritual of human sacrifice.

With the advent of video and DVD, it has become almost a quaint notion to base a film review or a critique solely on the first viewing in the semi-darkness of movie a house. The feature film, available to the reviewer even before its release, now makes it possible to scrutinize the footage in the minutest detail. Indeed, the reception and enjoyment of film has become increasingly akin to that of literature in that both the processes of "reading" the audiovisual and the literary "text" are characterized by the principles of hermeneutics and its circular, and cyclical, process of analysis. Viewing a film, like reading a novel, is no longer subject to the dictates of chronological linearity, nor is one compelled to sit through one complete, uninterrupted viewing.[1] In fact, the gradual shift from the formerly fleeting nature of the viewing experience, which used to be one of the guiding principles of film production, to a process of fragmented, detail-obsessed scrutiny, has not only changed the process of reception but also the art and craft of filmmaking both in terms of form and content.

Particularly in European auteur cinema, the adaptation of literary texts of unchallenged prestige has long been one of the guiding principles in film production, which, rather than declining, has experienced an upsurge over the past decade with numerous feature films based on successful novels by prestigious authors such as *La pianiste* in 2001 (Elfriede Jelinek, 1983) or *Dead Babies* in 2000 (Martin Amis, 1975), to list only a few of the adaptations based on recent novels, as opposed to film renditions of canonical texts such as Ackerman's, *La captive*, released in 2000, and Ruiz's *Le temps retrouvé* in 1999, both based on texts by Marcel Proust.

Clearly, European film has its sights firmly set on stories crafted by renowned European novelists, thus bringing together writers and filmmakers across national frontiers, linguistic barriers, artistic periods, styles and sensitivities. We therefore propose to explore the transformations required in the process of adapting literature to film in two areas: 1) in terms of structural and contextual changes that are necessary to preserve the narratological force of the source text upon its conversion into a visual spectacle that privileges the "power of the gaze"; and 2) in terms of the choices made by the filmmakers regarding what we have termed "the politics of cultural connotations".[2]

We claim that a contrastive reading of a highly artistic novel such as Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, and its equally ambitious screen adaptation by Harold Pinter

[1] Conversely, Poe's *Poetic Principle* stipulates just the reverse – namely to read the text as one is wont to watch a film - in one go without interruption.
[2] Due to the limited space, the authors had to dispense with an intriguing analysis of the politicizing process which becomes manifest in the film adaptation, especially in relation to gender and social issues.

and Paul Schrader exemplifies the gradual converging of the methods and habits of both production and reception of literature and film.[3] We shall see that the novel opts for narrative modes which in the movie translate into a complex textual fabric that, while scrupulously faithful to McEwan's plot, deploy their very own strategies to achieve cinematographic verisimilitude, a keen generic self-awareness, and a remarkable degree of intertextuality in its choices of narrative techniques and the recognizability of the spatial and geographical setting. In fact, in the introduction to his *Collected Screenplays 3*, Harold Pinter himself hints at some of the key issues regarding the setting and the generic features of both novel and film:

> Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* is a truly frightening book. It slid onto the screen. Paul Schrader moved about a dark Venice almost on tiptoe and the deepening magnetism of evil (with a smiling face) I think is truly disconcerting. I found in it an echo of silent movies where the audience would cry: "Don't go through that door!" But the two victims did go through that door and the fearsome Christopher Walken ate them up.[4]

The two characters that are about to fall victim to the "fearsome Christopher Walken" starring as Robert are Colin and Mary, an unmarried British couple in their thirties who have come to Venice in an attempt to emerge from an impasse that seems to have affected their love relationship and their respective acting careers. Right from the opening sequences of McEwan's source text and its audiovisual adaptation, the emotive opacity that seems to characterize their relationship is mirrored by their perception of the city that surrounds them. In the same way that Colin and Mary fail to connect with one another physically, intellectually, and affectively, they are out of sync with the holiday venue they have chosen to jumpstart a romance gone stale. By portraying the spatial setting through the focalized perception of the characters, in a fluid alteration of what Lubbock has denominated "showing" and "telling",[5] the text evokes the drowsy, stagnant mood of the protagonists ("Two flies gyrated lazily round the ceiling light," p. 1).

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[3] We cite from. McEwan, Ian. *The Comfort of Strangers*, Vintage: London 1997 (first published by Jonathan Cape, 1981.)

[4] Pinter, Harold *Collected Screenplays 3*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

[5] In the analysis of audiovisual narrative, it is useful to distinguish the different modes of representation classified by Percy Lubbock as "telling" and "showing", modes which differ according to the degree of implication of the narrative authority in the story. "Showing", here, refers to mere dramatic representation which results in a very limited presence of the narrator, while "telling" implies the active presence of the narrator.

In the movie, this inability to relate to each other and their environment is immediately obvious in the sequence (following the tracking shot of Colin on the balcony) which first portrays Colin and Mary in their hotel room with Colin reading a script for a play while Mary attempts to place a call to her children in England. Both attempts fail miserably with Colin declaring the script "unreadable" as Mary slams down the receiver after struggling in vain to communicate with the Italian operator. When the call finally does come through, Colin, sitting on the bed opposite, makes no attempt to hide the weariness produced in him at the thought of Mary's children from a previous marriage.

The scene, absent from the novel, provides a first clue to the divergent strategies employed in the source text and the motion picture to portray two estranged lovers out of tune with each other and their context. In the novel, the sensation of affective and perceptual opacity is achieved by portraying Colin and Mary as foreigners in an impenetrably alien cultural setting. Indeed, almost the entire first half of the text abounds with instances that serve to convey the wondrously impenetrable nature of the nameless foreign city and its populace, or perhaps more accurately, the protagonists' projection of their own incapacity or unwillingness to decode, to connect, and to empathize. Thus, the novel opens with an account of the inexplicable behavior of the natives. Every afternoon, outside their hotel room, men work with no apparent purpose with mallets and chisels on boats "with no visible cargo or means of propulsion." Equally, the eerie thoroughness and fervor with which the anonymous maid carries out her task, and on which they come to rely completely, is a source of wonder to the British couple. The strangely disjointed city maps that refuse to provide orientation in a city where "there were no signs"(10), sold from the "virtual darkness" of barred kiosks by only partially visible and largely unintelligible vendors adds to the mystification of Colin and Mary, who wander around in "one of the eating capitals of the world" (13), presumably in the Mediterranean, where no food is to be had after nine 9'clock, public water fountains don't work, and local shops dedicate themselves to selling "one single item" (13). The Kafkaesque city space, populated by bizarrely inexpressive natives who go about their business compelled by unfathomable purposes (see also 29-34) eerily sets the stage for the unfolding gothic tale.

McEwan's strategy rests on the creation of a setting that is transmitted to the reader through the conscience of the emotionally alienated characters. The cultural connotations toy with, yet ultimately defy, a clear identification with the actual city of

Venice. Conversely, the filmmakers - clearly unwilling to sacrifice the dramatic potential and the recognizablility of Venice - chose to deploy a strategy that relies on cultural connotation as well. However, in contrast to McEwan's geographical and cultural opacity Schrader opted for creating of a mystifyingly labyrinthine city space couched in an extravagant, oriental scenario. Thus, the camera proceeds right from the very start of the film to trace the passageways of the maze in a series of long, unhurried tracking shots that change direction at right angles. In the first take, the camera is tilted upwards, tracing the ceiling of a luxurious Venetian house in forward motion. In the second take, the camera travels from left to right along the length of a wall of the spacious apartment, lavishly furnished and decorated with what seems to be Venetian art. Tellingly, the camera briefly lingers on a framed antique map of the city of Venice showing the maze of streets, lanes, and small canals clustering around the meandering bends of the *canale grande*.

Subsequently, the gaze of the camera moves through a few more right-angle turns when Caroline (Helen Mirren) makes a sudden entrance through a door from the left and is captured in a wide shot. The mise-en scène in this first sequence might be characterized as a comfortable, though not ostentatious, prison where Carolina, as we shall eventually learn, is compelled to remain a virtual prisoner. Presently, Robert's voice-over launches into a monologue revolving around his father:

> "My father was a very big man. All his life he wore a black moustache.
> When it turned grey, he used a little brush to make it black, such as ladies
> do for their eyes – *mascara*."

In the sequence that accompanies Robert's monologue, and which is radically different from the treatment in the novel, it is worthwhile to highlight the shift from a third-person omniscient narrator (often reducing the point-of-view third person limited) to a narrator who is initially extradiegetic but will eventually become an actor in the story. [6] Indeed, in the opening sequence we are given to understand that he not only "tells" about his father but that he also "shows" us the labyrinthine setting of the story in the shape of an ancient map of Venice, and the bed in which his victims will rest, naked and exposed on the sacrificial altar, after having found their way through the maze to the minotaur's lair. The somber effect is enhanced by Angelo Baladamenti's music score,

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[6] For an in-depth analysis of the intricacies of the different narrative perspectives that are deliberately mixed in both novel and film see Charles Forceville, "The Conspiracy in *The Comfort of Stranger*s: Narration in the Novel and the Film". *Language and Literature*, Vol. 11(2):119-135.

which in this particular scene resembles a kind of requiem, apparently emanating from an old-fashioned phonograph shown in a close-up by the roaming camera. It is here that Robert's voice cuts in with the authority of the narrator, pronouncing the central speech of the narrative, which in the novel is placed roughly in the first third of the text. In both novel and film, the passage is delivered in direct speech as opposed to the free indirect speech which abounds in the novel. From the very outset, the mise-en-scène opts for a conscious solemnity and austerity clearly reminiscent of the transcendental style endorsed by Schrader in his 1972 study entitled *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*.[7]

In keeping with Schrader's postulate, and in addition to showcasing the maze-like mise-en-shot of the house (and later the city), the audience's interest is sustained very effectively through the second strategy alluded to earlier, i.e. the creation, within the confines of the familiar Venetian location, of a parallel microcosm in the shape of a magical oriental setting reminiscent of *Arabian Nights*. Accordingly, when the camera's journey through the apartment comes to a halt, the audience literally finds itself in an opulently furnished gallery, looking out through palm leaves and a row of pillars over a city skyline dominated by domed buildings and slender towers. The setting is indeed more suggestive of the Far East than of Italy, and so the audience is expectant as to what they will see, when they step up to the balustrade to look out into the setting sun. They find themselves gazing into the pastel colors of a Turner-like sunset of a wide bay harbor with the silhouetted outlines of a picturesquely unfamiliar-looking city in the background. Instantaneously, the music score, which had momentarily ceased, changes to a melody carried by flute evocative of "oriental", Persian, or Arabian music – much like the hypnotic flute-play of a snake-charmer. In harmony with this change of tone, the still shot of the Turner-like "canvas" is followed by three more stills, one of a canal framed by typical Venetian buildings, then a bird's eye view of what looks like a temple-like structure crowned by five large domes in the midst of a cluster of houses, and finally the facade of the "Hotel Gabrielli" with its curve-shaped, peaked windows and pillared balconies, equally redolent of a far eastern setting, creating a fleeting sensation that we are now outside the previously explored apartment.

This recurrent, "exotic" mise-en scène creates a paradoxical impression through its "orientalizing" gaze upon a popular western holiday destination. The effect strongly

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[7] Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, Da Capo: New York 1988 (first published by University of California Press,1972).

resonates with the theoretical concepts put forward in Edward Said's fundamental critical study *Orientalism* (1979), a crucial source text for any scholar who strives to comprehend the hegemonic structures of knowledge, and the construction and representation of cultural identity. If in Said's view the image of the Islamic orient is the result of the colonial "othering" gaze which the West forces upon the East, in Schrader's film we are confronted with an orientalization of the Occident, which helps generate an image of extreme "otherness" in the destination / destiny of Colin and Mary.

This orientalizing mise-en-scène is taken up with force in the balcony sequence featuring Caroline and Mary dressed in what can only be described as the ceremonial robes of the high priestess (Caroline in an earth-colored gown) and the novice (Mary in white). The camera now explores the pillared gallery in greater detail, relishing the ambiance of the *seraglio* richly decked out with ottomans, plush cushions, and magnificently tiled walls. The sensation of the impending ritual is enhanced by Caroline's devout poise and prayer-like gestures. While they talk, the camera pans, tracks and zooms, showcasing the women within this unlikely setting, repeatedly exhibiting Mary amidst the large ritualistic mandala patterns of the tiled wall behind her. The overall sensation is that of a pagan rite of passage: preparing the spectator for the impending human sacrifice, the sublime rite of stepping through the mirror.

This manipulation of cultural connotations is the strategy that Schrader has contrived to create an effect on a par with McEwan's anonymous hermetic city without relinquishing the import and the suggestive qualities Venice has as a setting of films such as *Death in Venice* or *Don't Look Now*. While McEwan portrays a city with no name, with a topology and with semantics that are impenetrable to Mary and Colin, Schrader achieves a similar effect by generating an audiovisual concept that places Robert and Mary's Venetian house in a kind of orientalized, ritualized domain that exists at once inside and outside the heart of the old city. On their walks through the labyrinth of streets, bridges and canals, Mary and Colin enter this mysterious domain, are drawn towards its center (Pinter's "magnetism of evil"), towards Robert's shrine, and into the lair of the beast. Lacking Ariadna's ball of thread (maps are no good in McEwan's eerie, nameless city) the characters are truly mystified and will duly get ensnared in the trap laid out by Robert and Caroline.[8] In the film, the victims'

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[8] The girl throwing Colin a ball might actually be a tenuous reference to the story of Theseus and Minos and Ariadna's ball of thread. The same scene is narrated in slightly different detail in the book with radically different implications: it serves to foreshadow the punch Colin receives from Robert.

mystification is accomplished through the bewildering effect of the alien setting complemented by discontinuous editing and mise-en-scène. In a shot-by-shot analysis of the sequence in which Colin and Mary (C&M) leave the hotel in search of a restaurant despite the late hour, it will emerge how the camera creates a sensation of disorientation by means of a contrived degree of discontinuity in the editing of shots.

At the outset, the camera pans vertically down to show a waiter removing the chairs of an outdoor café, implicitly confirming that it's indeed past closing time. The pan ends in a mid shot of the couple turning their heads this way and that, clearly having lost their way. The camera now tracks back with C&M slowly walking in the same direction. Next, the camera cuts to a wide shot of the couple facing away, about to enter a narrow dark lane on the right, followed by a boom crane shot of a sparsely illuminated lane that cuts the frame diagonally in two. C&M emerge in the lower right and exit at the top left, conveying the impression of an elevated position. Cut to another lane: C&M enter from the right hand side; they round a corner, and keep walking facing the camera which dollies back before them until they cross a small bridge over a canal. The camera swivels, and they are captured in profile in a wide shot, again looking around for some landmark to guide them. They exit right, and the next frame shows them in a frontal shot, entering into yet another narrow street, only lit by an overhead streetlight. Colin and Mary stop and move closer to the camera to debate which way to go. They look in opposite directions, and even take a few steps away from each other. The camera tracks them as they enter the next lane to the left with the lens never leaving them until they make a right turn and stop: they have definitely lost their way. The camera circles them just prior to their exiting into another small street, with the result that the spectators have lost their point of reference, and thus have no way of placing them on the virtual map of the space represented in the sequence. They enter unexpectedly from the left and walk until they come across an illuminated shop window (it is not clear what is on sale) and they detain themselves briefly. The sequence continues in like fashion, clearly breaking the directional continuity on several occasions and resulting in a sensation of disorientation shared by the audience who empathize with the tourists adrift in the dark city. Not until they are ambushed by Robert in another public square does the editing return to a coherent directional continuity: Robert knows the way and will steer them to their final destiny.

In a 1998 discussion of walking and watching in the city, Brian Jarvis charts the evolution of this *leitmotif* under the heading "From *flânerie* to 'get lost'". He traces the

various modes the theme of walking has passed through: Walter Benjamin's leisurely *flâneur* who discovers the city's secrets almost by accident; the medieval man turned minotaur in his labyrinthine city defenses; Joyce's and Borges' disenchanted modern citizens who become trapped in the city maze; and finally Paul Auster's postmodern hero who walks simply "to be lost in the city and to himself".[9] Here, in *The Comfort of Strangers* we discover a new variant of "From *flânerie* to 'get lost'". In the case of Mary and Colin, though, the getting lost is subliminal, and rather than mirroring the yearning for the inner void of Auster's Quinn in the *City of Glass*, Mary and Colin's drifting through the alien, uncongenial city represents their very own projection of the affective limbo in which their relationship is suspended. In a lot of ways, Schrader's camera roaming across a seemingly distant, alien city in a landscape so unlike the *Veneto*, complements and compounds the state of being lost, and thus transports both victims and spectators deeper into the minotaur's labyrinth and towards the ritual sacrifice that awaits them.

[9] Jarvis, Brian. *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture*. London: Pluto Press (1998), pp.84-86.

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