

Ondaatje Goes to Hollywood

The Costs of Mainstream Arrival for the Representation of Cultural Difference

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My most noteworthy memory of the 1996 Academy Awards broadcast is that awkward prelude to the acceptance of “Best Picture” by *The English Patient* producer Saul Zaentz. Director Anthony Minghella hovers anxiously a few feet from the main microphone and, in a low but audible voice, reminds Zaentz to thank “Michael.” This moment both signals and confirms Michael Ondaatje’s effective absence from the culminating scene of his “arrival” in the cultural field of major-market cinema. Acknowledging “Michael,” thanking “Michael” – these, evidently, are gestures of “good form” that might be forgotten. “Michael” is not present, on stage, as, say, the indispensable collaborator that both Minghella and Zaentz evoke in other contexts, notably in their prefatory writings for Minghella’s published screenplay (Foreword xi, xii; Preface xiii-xiv). At the Awards, “Michael” needs to be restored, if only briefly, to the cinematic consecration of *The English Patient*, a title that once belonged to him. In recollecting this little Awards moment, my primary concern is not then with “Michael” as a sign of the minority writer, but rather with “Michael” as a sign that attaches, metonymically, to the literary text of *The English Patient*, a work which has, evidently, no necessary place in the crowning moment of the film version’s success story. The moment stages (quite literally) the potentially problematic rela-

relationship between the literary work and its high-profile filmic reproduction, raising questions about the shared title: after 1996, what meanings, what contents, does *The English Patient* assemble? what has been altered, what added, what lost?

In this essay, I consider how the major-market cinematic reproduction of *The English Patient* transforms, elides and partially effaces important aspects of the cultural impact and agency of Ondaatje's literary text. Notwithstanding his professed commitment to the underdog, particularly the cultural "mongrel" (Bush 244), and the "international bastards – born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere" (*The English Patient* 176), Ondaatje and his writing have recently "arrived" in relation to the cultural mainstream both in Canada and internationally. However, this arrival has been mediated, crucially, by the cultural apparatus of major-market film production. What then, I ask, are the cultural effects of this mediation? If the translation from Booker Prize novel to Oscar-winning hit movie transforms the meanings and values that attach to the title "The English Patient," what cultural work is being performed at present under the aegis of that title? After 1996, what changes mark the place and purpose of Ondaatje's novel in what Pierre Bourdieu has called "the field of cultural production"? This field is a dynamic network of situations and contexts in which the meanings of cultural works are multiply mediated. Bourdieu's insistence on mediation points not only to objective historical and institutional conditions of production but also to conditions of reception. Moreover, Bourdieu articulates "culture," particularly in *The Field of Cultural Production*, as a field of competitions among differently positioned social actors, as a field of competitions that restage more broadly structured social relations of power. In the light of Bourdieu's contribution, then, one would consider the film of *The*

English Patient not as an instance of docile derivation but, rather, as a potent remediation of the literary predecessor, a remediation which plays for – competes for – decently high sociocultural stakes, and one which may play *against* its predecessor. Similarly, one would expect the film to restructure, significantly, the literary document's overall participation in the cultural field.

At issue, in the first instance, are the cultural effects arising from the novel's visualization, which transports that "vision" we typically ascribe to authors and literary works from the realm of metaphor to that of concrete materiality. In the most baldly simple sense, as spectator-participants in contemporary cultural processes, we first *see* a narrative bearing the title "The English Patient" when the Miramax film comes out. But there is another distinct, visual and imagistic presentation of the text that is more intimately, more inescapably linked to its status as contemporary literature – the book cover or, rather, in the present case, the covers. The most recent of these manifests, unmistakably, the defining impact of *The English Patient's* translation across the fields of its production, effectively staging a transformation of the conditions of reading and interpretation by high-profile film reproduction.

The initial Vintage paperback cover shows a non-European man – his garb suggests he is Indian or perhaps North African – climbing a difficult escarpment, as Kip does in one of the novel's passages (70). Another cover, which circulates after the Booker Prize announcement, evokes the desert-wanderer caught up in a sandstorm that obscures our view of him. This cover seems to me to point to Almásy's status as a troubled, latter-day version of the European imperial adventurer, as an imperial figure caught up in crisis and faced with the threat of dissolution.¹ The more recent, and now the most broadly circulated, Vintage cover features a pho-

tographic reproduction that is duly copyrighted by Miramax films. Here, the film's two European principals, Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas, engage in the glowing close-up kiss of classic Hollywood romance. It is crucial to note, however, that an image answering closely to this cover shot never appears in the film. That is, the image is not an appetizing *synecdoche*, a tasty part for the whole, but something more like a luminescent metaphorical condensation of the overall narrative design. This visual metaphor proposes itself as a stand-in for the literary narrative as much as for the filmic one.

The alluring graininess in the presentation of the flesh, in the faces and in Scott Thomas's luminescent shoulder, recapitulates the imagery of the film's opening sequences – the desert landscape as an expanse of grainy, golden, flesh-evoking contours, as an obviously eroticized place of contemporary neocolonial, touristic, fantasy-inspiring romance. As Minghella's screenplay specifies, "The late sun turns the sand every color from crimson to black and makes the dunes look like bodies pressed against each other" (1). The cover image's setting sun, which is literally contingent upon the brows of the kissing faces, seems thus to invite our indulgence in a delicious, nostalgic yearning for forms of erotic experience that seem almost constitutively incompatible with our late-twentieth-century urban lives in urban spaces.² The book now extends to its readers a splendid promise of pleasure framed in terms that are notably distinct from those put forward by the earlier austere, sparsely detailed covers, both of which withhold almost as much visual information as they offer.

I would also draw attention, however, to less alluring, but nonetheless noteworthy, aspects of the most recent cover. There is the sticker, appended to copies distributed after the 1996 Academy Awards: "#1 Bestseller; Acad-

emy Award Winner.” The sticker’s unabashed elision of difference between the book and the film is important: one single thing called *The English Patient* is a bestseller and an award-winning movie. The promotional slogan at the bottom of the front cover reiterates this message – “The Bestselling Novel Now A Major Motion Picture” – as does the hack cover layout, which presents glowing excerpts from book reviews paired with film credits as they would appear on a promotional poster – “Miramax Films presents a Saul Zaentz production . . .” All these elements of presentation are, of course, starkly promotional: the film is being used to sell the book and, thus, consumers are tacitly invited to read the book in relation to the film. The novel is now offered as an object reconstituted by desires, pleasures and also lines of interpretation for which the film is the primary referent. Moreover, references to instances of literary consecration – the Governor General’s Award, the Booker Prize – which figured quite prominently on earlier covers are now entirely absent. Market achievement, the bottom line for the major motion picture, reframes the novel’s presentation – it is now a “#1 Bestseller.”

Particularly because this primary cultural reproduction tends to insist on the sameness of novel and film – or at least on their fundamental, prevailing similarity – it is worthwhile to note some of the key differences that distinguish the book from the film. As I briefly noted earlier, one of the pre-1996 covers suggests that the narrative is crucially about the text’s non-white, non-European character – Kip, the Sikh sapper. Arguably, this cover does not mislead, does not belie the contents it heralds, notwithstanding a title foregrounding another character, the so-called “English patient,” Almásy.¹ Kip, in the novel, is certainly a fulcrum upon which the narrative shifts and then redistributes its emphases. One reads about a fifth of the book before he appears but, thereafter, he

figures prominently in or, indeed, dominates four of the book's remaining eight chapters. Most notably, in "August," the final chapter, the young Sikh spurs and definitively shapes the narrative's resolution. Indeed, I would assert that Kip's crucial importance founds the study of Ondaatje's text as postcolonial literature. Kip also is a figure who signals the pertinence of postcoloniality within considerations of minority experience. In so saying, I am suggesting that the examination of minority literature and culture can be supplemented, in certain instances, with the vocabulary and conceptual formations characterizing contemporary postcolonial criticism and theory. Considerations of cultural migrancy or diaspora, hybridity and on-going hybridization mark contemporary postcolonial debate, as does an insistent international frame of reference (which situates Canada amongst other nations of a decolonizing world). In the absence of a self-consciously postcolonial perspective, it would be difficult to situate a text like *The English Patient* in relation to contemporary developments of Canadian culture and to determine the implications, for national and international cultural processes, of the recent film adaptation. Certainly, the ascription of minority or postcolonial status should not depend, in a quite questionable, essentialist way, upon the author's Sri-Lankan roots; it should not lean – all too trustingly – upon that deliberate, if ironical spectacularization of "exotic" heritage, Ondaatje's canny 1982 autobiography, *Running in the Family*. The text of *The English Patient* makes, however, its own case, which even a cursory reading would reveal. When, for example, Kip is nicknamed "Kip" because Kirpal, his birth name, is rather too taxing for English tongues, one detects a move into the realm of minority experience. Similarly, Kip's discovery of minority status is evident in his recognition that his visible difference renders

him culturally invisible in England, an “anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world” (Ondaatje 196). Later in the novel when Kip, in his rage, unequivocally equates “Englishness” with racist, imperial violence, one must take note of the distinctly postcolonial perspective. Incontestably, Kip plays the part of the postcolonial migrant: he is the outsider, the newcomer, the initiate, who pieces his way through the maze of modern English culture and then through the more historically resonant cultural maze which is war-ravaged Italy.

The novel’s Kip demands to be considered in relation to questions of migrancy and the impact of migrancy upon technologically advanced, postindustrial and postimperial societies. Stating the more general case, of which Ondaatje’s Kip is a representative, Iain Chambers writes:

When the “Third World” is no longer maintained at a distance “out there” but begins to appear “in here”, when the encounter between diverse cultures, histories, religions and languages no longer occurs along the peripheries, . . . but emerges at the centre of our daily lives, in the cities and cultures of the so-called “advanced”, or “First”, world, then we can perhaps begin to talk of a significant interruption in the preceding sense of our own lives, cultures, languages and futures. (2)

This late-twentieth-century cultural process Chambers suggests, which moves through “interruption” to the possibility of cultural reevaluation, can contribute significantly to the interpretation of Kip’s narrative role. It elucidates the purpose of Kip’s extensive training in England and accounts for the allegorical import of his work: he is a sapper, a bomb defuser, trained to engage with and disarm modern Europe’s complex technologies of violence. Once in Italy, and still pursuing his work, Kip situates himself at the centre of a multifaceted engagement with questions of colonial and postcolonial cultures and iden-

tities – the questions that emerge within the ruins of San Girolamo from the interactions of characters with diverse national, ethnic and class backgrounds. The narrative resolution turns, moreover, upon Kip's recognition of the impossibility of his relation with "Europe" – with European cultural codes and meanings – and his decisive withdrawal from participation in the project of salvaging and remaking the Western world.

But if I propose that Ondaatje's Kip figures forth the cultural agency of the contemporary postcolonial migrant – the migrant, moreover, who ultimately says "no" to "Europe" – I must also note that, in the film, he is little more than a "sexy Sikh" or, to use Pandit and McGuire's terminology, an example of "the commodification of alterities" (7). The cinematic Kip represents the cultural other as fantasy object to be consumed and enjoyed. Minghella's film presents an imaginary postcolonial environment in which cultural differences have no apparent disruptive or transformative potential, an environment where recognition across difference is immediate and unequivocal, unproblematic and fairly much unproblematized. Consider, for example, Hana and Kip's cross-cultural romance. In its inaugural moment Hana follows a luminous path of "shell lamps" (filled with oil) to the place of the first tryst. Kip, like the yearned-for Biblical bridegroom, says, "Hana," as he "steps out of the darkness" into light; Hana blissfully responds, "Kip" (Minghella, *English* 123). A love affair develops straightforwardly. Kip suffers a crisis, not due to the news of the A-bombings in Japan, but because of the sudden death of his English sapper cohort. He eventually departs from Villa San Girolamo, not in a furore of anti-European protest, but simply because he has been transferred – to Florence. And, of course, the film's resolution promises reunion: Hana, after the death of her patient, takes to the road, headed for Florence.³

If one allows, however, that Minghella's film participates in contemporary cultural processes in ways that differ significantly from those that are evident in the novel, one needs then to consider questions of legibility: how, and to what degree, do differences register; how do actual readers and viewers apprehend and evaluate the relationship between the two versions of *The English Patient*? While teaching Ondaatje's novel at Queen's University in 1998, I dedicated a portion of discussion time to examining the relationship between the literary text and the film. Many students chose to continue with this examination in their journal writing, which they produced at a rate of one page per week. This writing sheds light, I find, on the problem of reading Ondaatje's *The English Patient* in 1998 – that is, in the wake of the progress of the immensely successful film. (I cite the students by name, to make clear that I am putting forward a reasonably diversified assembly of critical responses rather than producing some generic version of “the student view.”) Edwina O'Shea notes “the over-emphasis of the Katharine/Almásy love affair” in a film that “meets all of Hollywood's requirements for a larger than life romance.” A sense that the film conforms to norms of Hollywood narrative is also present in the writing of several others. Elizabeth Frogley admits that she first decided to read the book “because [she] liked the movie so much.” Yet she goes on to note that the Katharine/Almásy affair “dominates the movie,” reflecting, “Maybe this is because the Kip-Hana relationship . . . is less acceptable” to audiences. “Or maybe,” she then suggests, “the people who made the movie just assumed it would be less acceptable or less interesting to movie viewers, which is a major problem in itself.” Niana McNalley, Sonya Melim and Ian Busch object in various ways to the film's depleted presentation of Kip, Hana and Caravaggio. Busch's treatment makes an issue of the pursuit of “big

bucks” and, indeed, other writers touch on the question of commercial viability, albeit, in passing. I will conclude this selection of students’ contributions by quoting Nikki Shaver at some length because she concentrates on the novel/film comparison with a noteworthy intensity:

While Ondaatje’s novel undoubtedly explores love under the unusual circumstances of war and exile, *The English Patient* is a work primarily concerned with issues of nationhood and identity. This becomes clear through many conversations in the book, such as Kip’s speech about England near the end: “You and then the Americans converted us. With your missionary rules. And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes so they could be *pukkah*. You had wars like cricket.” . . . Ondaatje focuses much of the novel on telling the histories of Kip . . . in England, and of Hana and Caravaggio . . . However, in the film these histories are neglected. Movie-Kip seems to have no qualms about working for the English, and his . . . notable statement about nationality is: “Hardy and the patient, they represent all that is good about England.” Similarly, Caravaggio’s history with Hana’s father is completely left out of the film, and Hana’s Canadian nationality is downplayed enormously. Instead, the film magnifies the romance of Katharine and the patient, focusing on the Hollywood tropes which reside amidst the complexities of the novel.

To begin a processing of my students’ writings, I note first that these reader/viewers have some sense of the issues Pierre Bourdieu confronts in relation to “the field of cultural production.” They seem, clearly, to understand that a work of serious literature and a major-market movie do not take place culturally in quite the same way. In Bourdieu’s terms, the two inhabit distinct sub-fields of cultural production: the ambitious novel plays for stakes that are not exclusively but predominantly symbolic—cultural prestige, critical consecration and the like; the film, whose production costs exceed thirty million dollars, must form a tighter bond with broad-based mar-

keting potential and measure much of its success in dollar revenues. Moreover, as Frogley suggests, the film-maker works with distinct expectations as to his audience's sensibilities, tastes and levels of cultural competence. Also apparent in the students' contributions is an awareness that the shift from novel to film entails, to use a musical figure, a shift from minor to major: the soaring romance between the European principals comes to the fore, and the characters, situations and scenes that treat minority experience recede or disappear. Similarly, as Shaver's commentary makes particularly clear, the film version has no use for the novel's distinctly postcolonial perspectives on nation and nationality, cultural identity and history.⁵ Shaver also recognizes that the depleted representation of non-European elements in the film coincides with the reduced presence of the "minor" nation, Canada, within the narrative's imagined world. To extend from this enabling observation, one may observe that the filmic Hana, now a francophone from Montreal, is not re-envisioned with the commitment to culturally specific characterization that marks Ondaatje's Anglo-Canadian original – as is evidenced in a primary way by the casting of a well-known *French* actress in the role. Hana's intensely fraught relationship with the English cultural archive and her consequently ambivalent relationship with her "English patient" are lost elements in the film version. Also lost – given that the filmic Hana is neither Anglo-Canadian nor convincingly *montréalaise* – is the interpretive path that would treat the Hana/Kip relationship as an allegorical rendering of possibilities for cross-cultural encounter and exchange in contemporary Canada.

But to deal directly again with my students' writings – what should one make of them overall? My original design had been to use them as an initial approach to a conclusion that would delineate major-market cultural production as a subfield that is still closed to com-

plex, nuanced treatments of minority and postcolonial topics. I intended to emphasize that the productive address of such topics still tends to be restricted to enclaves of literary culture, to works of relatively limited cultural dissemination – a point that emerges from the general thrust of the students' commentary. I knew that I would not be offering anything particularly surprising, but I thought that the film version of *The English Patient*, with its tremendous popular success and its profit margin of more than a hundred million and counting, would provide a single instance compelling enough to make the argument worthwhile. But, in any case, that conclusion, as it happens, has become the road not travelled. As I worked through the student material, editing, assembling and rearranging, it occurred to me that often if not invariably the journal writings demonstrate that the film, by its redistribution of emphases, by its elisions and omissions, brings certain aspects of the novel into sharper focus. In the realm of literary experience, this novel's concerns with cross-cultural encounter and the forging of postcolonial consciousness become more thoroughly evident, more *legible*, because the film version puts these aspects aside or treats them inadequately. The film's advent within the field of cultural production thus spurs the reading of Ondaatje's novel as a work that is crucially concerned with postcolonial experience and, notably, with the negotiation of cultural differences. And, I should add, it makes clearer the cultural and political stakes of such a reading.

In closing, however, I must place limits upon my new optimism. As I noted earlier, since its release in 1996 the film is being used to promote the book – and very successfully.⁶ What will readers discover, then, who come to the novel from the film? I would now conclude that the cultural effects of that promotional initiative are, to some degree, encouragingly unpredictable. But it still

troubles me to think that for many consumers of cultural products *The English Patient* is and will remain exclusively a film experience. Returning one more time to Bourdieu, I recall his arguing that patterns of production and consumption emerge not independently, but contingently, interdependently. The production of cultural goods is directly, ineluctably, linked to the production of taste. Moreover, "the appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not distributed universally" (*Distinction* 228). Appropriations are marked by inclusions and exclusions. If one allows that the film of *The English Patient* has forged a place for itself within "the legitimate culture" of class-divided North American society, one must also remember that this legitimate culture is itself "a product of domination predisposed to express or legitimate domination" (228). Consumer participation in stagings of legitimate culture will yield for some, and not for others, what Bourdieu calls "a profit in legitimacy," which is "the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be" (231). Viewed in the light of this commentary, Minghella's film must appear as a victory of the cultural mainstream over initiatives of minority and postcolonial representation.⁷ The filmic Kip does not challenge or "interrupt" (to use Chambers's figure) the experience of selfhood and culture that the European principals represent. Indeed, in being presented as a spectacle, "a sexy Sikh," he effectively recedes into cultural invisibility, the very invisibility the novel presents as a problem, a matter for encounter, negotiation across difference, learning. Yet this mainstream victory I speak of can and should be considered a limited victory, limited because it provokes countering effects in the cultural field. The film produces and, presumably, will continue to produce new or renewed readings of the literary text, by readers newly and, perhaps, differently disposed

to the reading. It may be that, at least for some readers, Ondaatje's novel manifests concerns with minority and postcolonial experience more clearly after 1996, precisely because of the film's selective reworking of its contents.

NOTES

1. Wachtel, in her 1994 interview, alludes to the novel's use of "a peculiarly British mythology—the exoticism of Lawrence of Arabia." Ondaatje responds by affirming that this "English rake on the desert" is indeed "very central" to his development of the narrative (255).
2. The *Seinfeld* treatment of "The English Patient" phenomenon, particularly the intense antipathy Elaine feels for the suddenly unavoidable must-see film, presents the other side of the nostalgia coin. Elaine's squirming response to the film's portrayals of eroticism and romance counters the curious, emotionally expansive "wetness" of this desert film—a "wetness" entirely incompatible with the unrelenting urban, edgy and ironical "dryness" of the *Seinfeld* scene. It is worth noting, however, that Elaine's evidently unswerving commitment to the prevailing norms of *Seinfeld* sensibility makes her unpopular, first with the boyfriend who dumps her (as a result of her anti-*English Patient* position), and subsequently with virtually every other character, major and minor. In a fateful turn of events, Elaine's boss, Peterman, takes up the project of her sentimental education, obliging her to go to the Tunisian desert to live, for an unspecified time, in a cave.
3. I feel a need to pose here a qualifying question: is not "English Patientness," in different ways, a condition that one can ascribe to other major characters? Hana and Kip, I would affirm, are also obliged to discover and work through their relation with the English cultural legacy, obliged to be, in a sense, "patients" of the cultural conditions of Englishness.
4. At this point, I have clearly opted in favour of the novel over the film with respect to the representation of minority and postcolonial concerns. However, I should emphasize that my thinking is comparative and does not entail a thorough appropriation of Ondaatje's treatment of those concerns. Ondaatje's presentation of his young Sikh, as one who has an instinctive affinity with machines, certainly bears traces of exoticism. The relation between Caravaggio's particular talents and his ethnicity needs to be pondered. Certainly, the notion that courtesans rouch when Hana and Kip caress seems to me a too easy, too romantic portrayal of the negotiation of cultural differences. I hold, however, to my overall sense that Ondaatje's novel, unlike Minghella's film, is quite complex in its envisioning of cultural identity and cross-cultural exchange.
5. I have had to make selective use of my students' input, leaving out or rendering rather too briefly a good deal of what my journal reading had brought to my attention. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank, as a group, the participants in my 1997-98 English 282 course at Queen's University.
6. In a March 1997 *Globe and Mail* article, Elizabeth Renzetti puts forward the following input obtained from publishers. Since its appearance in 1992, Ondaatje's novel has sold 300,000 copies in Canada, "half of those since the film was released." Vintage sold 200,000 in the United States before the film release and, in response to market demand, "has shipped a million copies since." Interestingly, bookstore owners also informed Renzetti of an astonishingly intense demand, backed by substantial money offers, for their film-derived window display materials.

7. Particularly disheartening, with respect to this mainstream "victory" and its public mediation, is the chorus of enraptured reviews that have greeted the film (see Corliss; Howe; Schulgasser). Many of these give attention to the film's status as an adaptation and generally speak in its favour in this respect. In Canada, the noteworthy "lone voice" of dissent is Thomas Hurka, who created a small flurry of *Globe and Mail* debate, by publishing in that paper in early 1997 a short condemnation of the film's ethics and politics. However, even Hurka's more ample reflection on the same topic in the *Queen's Quarterly* ends, in my view, just where it should begin. Having derailed the film's choosing of the personal over the political, Hurka closes his writing by too briefly observing that *The English Patient* film is "a product of its time, one in which people have abandoned concern for those in other countries or even for less fortunate members of their own society" (55).

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