

THE ENGLISH PATIENT: THE AESTHETICS OF VIOLENCE AND THE RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF HISTORY IN FICTION AND FILM

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Abstract:

This presentation explores the theme of violence which permeates Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and its transposition into film by Anthony Minghella (1996), for, either from a social-political perspective or from an individual point of view, the theme of violence is rendered in both art forms through scenes and images of passion, betrayal, mutilation, suffering and death. In examining the relationships which can be established among them, in order to reflect upon the essence of violence and conceptualize on the aesthetics of violence in art, we shall also be comparing some of the different narrative strategies used by the novelist and the director.

Keywords: Intermediality; Aesthetics; Violence; History; Michael Ondaatje.

The theme of violence and its portrayal in literature and art has always been a concern of writers and artists, one that has become even more meaningful today for readers and audiences, as violence, in its

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different forms and disguises, is imposed on us through the media and surrounds us in our daily lives, affecting our senses and sensibilities.

As Hannah Arendt declared in "On Violence", "no one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs" (1970: 8).

In Michael Ondaatje, this concern is apparent from the beginning of his "formal and thematic development", as John Bolland comments in relation to Ondaatje's poetry – "It is (...) the violence of his images that gains Ondaatje's poetry 'the raw power of myth'" (2002: 20)" as well as in relation to his novels, as "Ondaatje's artist heroes seek 'a loss of privacy', a transcendence of self through the intensity of their art, the violence of their lives, or the intensity of sexual passion" (p.21). As this awareness obviously acquires specific characteristics in each novel, this presentation intends to explore the theme of violence which, in different forms – individual, social and political –, permeates Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992) and its transposition into film by Anthony Minghella (1996) for, either from a social-political perspective or from an individual point of view, the theme of violence is rendered in both art forms through scenes and images of passion, betrayal, suffering and death.

In our discussion of these manifestations of violence and in order to examine the relationships which can be established among them, to reflect upon the essence of violence as an inherent human characteristic and to conceptualize on the aesthetics of violence in art as a means of denouncing its use and proliferation, we shall also be comparing some narrative strategies, approaches and methods used by Ondaatje and Minghella in their re-creation and transposition of this theme into novel and film.

1. The theme of violence in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

"There are betrayals in war that are childlike compared
with our human betrayals during peace."

The English patient's words, written in his "commonplace book" (EP: 96) in July 1936 and read by Hana – the young nurse who attends

this nameless, burned man lying in a room in an Italian villa – will be the starting point for our discussion of individual, social and political violence, as they bring together the different kinds of violence and betrayal developed in the novel in relation to the love affair between Almásy – the English patient – and Katharine Clifton.

As the already well-known plot confirms – the novel, set in historical time and space at the end of World War II in Italy, presents the devastating effects of the violence of war on the lives of the characters Hana, Kip and Caravaggio, effects which are set in contrast with and simultaneously establish a parallel with the violent and tragic consequences of the passionate love affair between Almásy and Katharine, recalled through the fragments of Almásy's memories. This affair begins in 1936, with the arrival of the newlyweds Katharine and Geoffrey Clifton in Cairo, to join the group of European explorers mapping the Libyan desert – among whom is Almásy –, develops into an intense adulterous passion which ends with Clifton's discovery of his wife's infidelity and his own death as he attempts to kill them all with his plane. Katharine, although she survives the crash, will die in the Cave of Swimmers to which Almásy has taken her, while he makes the long desert trek to find transport for her. Returning to the cave with the help of the Germans, Almásy carries Katharine's dead body to a plane that had been left near the base camp and succeeds in taking off with her. As the plane inevitably catches fire, Almásy, parachuting to the earth with his body all aflame, is saved by nomads, only to die, years later, in the Italian villa to which he had been taken by the allied troops.

If on a superficial level the exertion of individual violence seems to lie in Clifton's attempt to kill his wife and Almásy, we become aware, by examining the several definitions of betrayal (from L. *tradere*: to hand over, to deliver) –

1. to deliver into the hands of an enemy by treachery or fraud, in violation of trust; to help the enemy of (one's country, cause, etc); to be a traitor to;

2. to violate by fraud or by unfaithfulness;

3. to break faith with by disclosing a secret or that which was entrusted; to expose (person or thing);

4. to disclose, as something intended to be kept secret or that which prudence would conceal.

– of how the origin of individual violence and its tragic consequences – projected through Clifton's attempt to kill his wife and Almásy – does not lie in Clifton's discovery of his wife's adultery but is actually the result of his own betrayal of Katharine's trust, as he exposes in words the beauty of his wife's body to strangers, thus breaking faith with her, by disclosing a secret which she had entrusted to him – the sacredness of her body. As Almásy, retelling to Caravaggio the story of "how one falls in love", comments,

"He [Clifton] shared his adoration of her constantly" (...). "Clifton would be singing her praises. We tried to joke him out of it, but to wish him more modest would have been against him and none of us wanted that" (...). "Clifton celebrated the beauty of her arms, the thin lines of her ankles. He described witnessing her swim. He spoke about the new bidets in the hotel suite. Her ravenous hunger at breakfast" (...). "The words of her husband in praise of her meant nothing" (*EP*: 229-231).

But it is at the moment when Katharine, during the party that Clifton has planned for Almásy, starts reading aloud to the group of explorers the story of Candaules and his queen, from the *Histories* of Herodotus which Almásy has lent her, – "It was (...) what she had chosen to talk about" (232). – that we become aware of even deeper implications of this violation of trust, as it becomes inserted into a timeless frame, as a similar but much older form of betrayal and violence emerges from the quicksands of time:

This Candaules had become passionately in love with his own wife; and having become so, he deemed that his wife

was fairer by far than all other women. To Gyges, the son of Daskylus(...), he used to describe the beauty of his wife, raising it above all measure.(...)

He said to Gyges: "Gyges, I think that you do not believe me when I tell you of the beauty of my wife, for it happens that men's ears are less apt of belief than their eyes. Contrive therefore means by which you may look upon her naked". (...)

"I believe indeed that she is of all women the fairest and I entreat you not to ask of me that which it is not lawful for me to do". But the King answered him thus: "Be of good courage, Gyges, and have no fear, either of me, that I am saying these words to try you, or of my wife, lest any harm may happen to you from her. For I will contrive it so from the first that she shall not perceive that she has been seen by you". (...)

"I will place you in the room where we sleep, behind the open door; and after I have gone in, my wife will also come to lie down. Now there is a seat near the entrance of the room and on this she lays her garments as she takes them off one by one; and so you will be able to gaze at her at full leisure". (...)

(But Gyges is witnessed by the queen when he leaves the bedchamber. She understands then what has been done by her husband; and though ashamed, she raises no outcry... she holds her peace.(...)

(The next day the wife calls in Gyges and gives him two choices)

"There are now two ways open to you, and I will give you the choice which of the two you will prefer to take. Either you must slay Candaules and possess both me and the Kingdom of Lydia, or you must yourself on the spot be slain, so that you mayest not in future, by obeying Candaules in all things, see that which you should not. Either he must die who formed this design, or you who have looked upon me naked".

(The King is killed. A New Age begins. Gyges(...) reigned as King of Lydia for twenty-eight years, but we still remember him as only a cog in an unusual love story).(EP: 232-4)

For, even if Katharine was not yet fully aware of the future implications her reading of this story would have for the three of them, which is confirmed by Almásy's comments to Caravaggio –

this is a story of how I fell in love with a woman who read me a specific story from Herodotus. I heard the words she spoke across the fire, ever looking up, even when she teased her husband. Perhaps she was just reading it to him. Perhaps there was no ulterior motive in the selection except for themselves. It was simply a story that had jarred her in its familiarity of situation. But a path suddenly revealed itself in real life. Even though she had not conceived it as a first errant step in any way. I am sure.(EP:229)

– and even if Clifton's reasons could not be the same as Candaules', in Almásy's interpretation –

It is a strange story. Is it not, Caravaggio? The vanity of a man to the point where he wishes to be envied. Or he wishes to be believed, for he thinks he is not believed. This was in no way a portrait of Clifton, but he became a part of this story. There is something very shocking but human in the husband's act. Something makes us believe it.(EP:234)

– nevertheless the intertextual bridge established with Herodotus will indelibly link the development of betrayal and violence in both stories, despite the fact that the ending of Ondaatje's plot receives a different turn.

Clifton's bragging about his wife's beauty to the group of explorers, as seen, recontextualizes Candaule's boasting of his wife's

beauty to Gyges, as an instance of individual betrayal of trust and of the sacredness of marriage. As Gyges' appeals to the king to attest, it is "not lawful" for him to see the queen's nakedness.

In its turn, Katharine's awareness of her husband's violation of her intimacy through her reading of the Candaules story in Herodotus parallels the queen's awareness of her husband's betrayal of the sacredness of her body as she witnesses Gyges leaving her bedchamber, and thus having seen her nakedness; in the sequence of the novel, the revelation of K's nakedness is confirmed by A commenting to Caravaggio, "I saw her, conversed with her. We had each been continually in the presence of the other. (...) I began to be double formal in her company. (...) As if awkward about a previously revealed nakedness". (EP: 235-6). Further, Katharine's infidelity through her liaison with Almásy retrieves the queen's taking Gyges as a lover – and consequently giving him possession of the kingdom of Lydia –, but with a difference: for Gyges, it was the only choice open to him in order to remain alive as the queen had decided, deep in her heart, to take revenge either on Candaules or on Gyges, by eliminating one of the two guilty men, for, among the Lydians, as among almost all barbarian people, it is an opprobrium even for a man, to be seen in his nakedness (Herodotus, 19.: 39). Thus, if on the one hand Almásy became Katharine's lover because that night, "with the help of an anecdote", he "fell in love" (EP: 234), Katharine, in spite of Almásy's interpretation, mentioned above, that she could not have "conceived it [Candaules's story] as a first errant step in any way" (EP: 229), nevertheless became aware of a new alternative open to her. The very word "errant", with its double meaning of "roaming in quest of adventure" as well as "erring, deviation from correct standard", already points to the "path" she would follow, maybe as an unconscious revenge for her husband's betrayal which led to her sexual and social betrayal, for the rules concerning trust in marriage had already been broken by Clifton. This recontextualizes the consequences of Candaules not taking Gyges's admonition – "Do you forget that a woman loses her shame when she undresses?" as the king orders him to see the queen in her

nakedness; or maybe, after having been seen “undressed” by her husband’s friends, Katharine also feels free to choose a new path in her life. As Almásy retells the story to Caravaggio, “On Hassanein Bey’s lawn (...) she turned back to me and said, ‘I want you to ravish me.’ (...) It was as if she had handed me a knife. Within a month I was her lover” (EP:236), while later on, when Katharine has returned to her husband, Almásy muses: “What had our relationship been? A betrayal of those around us, or the desire of another life?” (EP:238), thus suggesting that Katharine’s “first errant step” could also have been her “quest for adventure”, her “desire of another life”, and thus removing the negative connotation of “deviation from correct standard” implicit in “errant”.

Nevertheless, Clifton’s violence leading to death as he, literally like a *deus ex machina*, comes down from the heavens with his plane as an instrument of power to kill Almásy, establishes a parallelism of contrast or, in other words, a “comparison for unlikeness’ sake” (Hopkins, cited in Jakobson, 1960: 369) with Herodotus’ story, for here it is the betrayed husband that tries to kill his wife and her lover. But, again paralleling Candaules, it is Clifton who is killed, not by his wife’s future lover but by his own instrument of power, as his plane crashes. As Almásy recalls the event,

“When I heard the plane, saw it, I was already climbing down the rocks of the plateau. Clifton was always prompt.(...) I have watched them approach me in the desert and I have come out of my tent always with fear. (...) The plane veered to the left and circled, and sighting me again realigned itself and came straight towards me. Fifty yards away from me it suddenly tilted and crashed. I started running towards it. (...) He was supposed to be alone. But when I got there to pull him out, she was beside him.

He was dead. She was trying to move the lower part of her body, looking straight ahead. I carried her out of the plane (...) and carried her up into the rock caves. Into the Cave of Swimmers, where the paintings were. (EP: 256-7)

we simultaneously become aware of how much this manifestation of violence and its consequences can be better understood by way of Arendt's conceptualizations on the nature and causes of violence –

Violence is neither beastly nor irrational. That violence often springs from rage is a commonplace, and rage can indeed be irrational and pathological, but so can every other human affect.(...) Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. (...) the danger of violence will always be that the means overwhelm the end. (...) Action is irreversible, and a return to the status quo in case of defeat is always unlikely. (63-80)

– and through her discussion of violence in relation to power:

there is a consensus that violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power.

(...). The most crucial political issue is, and always has been the question of Who rules Whom? Power, strength, force, authority, violence – these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man (...) Violence is distinguished by its instrumental character. It is close to strength, since the implements of violence are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until they can substitute for it.(...). Power needs no justification, only legitimacy. Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate. (...) Power and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together. (...) It has often been said that impotence breeds violence, and psychologically this is quite true, at least of persons possessing natural strength, moral or physical. (35-52)

For now we realize that if “violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power”, not only does Clinton’s rage lead to violence – as it springs from his impotence to deal with a situation that was originally created by himself, through his betrayal of his wife’s intimacy to strangers – but it is itself also a manifestation of his loss of power – who rules whom? – over his wife, for suddenly she perceives that she has freed herself from this authority and now has a will of her own. As Almásy remarks again to Caravaggio, when Katharine finishes Herodotus’ story, “she stopped reading and looked up. Out of the quicksand. She was evolving. So power changed hands” (*EP*: 234). Further, we realize that the violence Clifton will exert over the others, although not legitimate, seems justifiable to him as the betrayed husband, and that the implements of violence he uses for this end – his plane – not only increase his natural strength to act but simultaneously reveal the intensity of the rage that is burning inside him. As Almásy comments to Caravaggio, “It had been planned as a suicide-murder by her husband that would involve all three of us” (*EP*: 171). But, as “the danger of violence will always be that the means overwhelm the end”, Clifton’s action, besides being irreversible by leading to his own and later to Katharine’s death, will also have further and unpredictable consequences.

Firstly, it leads to Almásy’s political betrayal of the allies to the Germans in order to receive transport to return to where Katharine lies, a betrayal that, besides being a late result of Clinton’s violence towards them, seems “trivial” if compared with their “human betrayals during peace” (*EP*: 97), as Almásy wrote in his diary. Therefore, we become aware of how the theme of political betrayal, in Almásy’s case, is actually the consequence of an individual and social betrayal, and, even if it is toned down by the tragic outcome of his and Katharine’s love affair, it is nevertheless the cause of the German army advancing up through Egypt and of their subsequent control of the North African desert, leading to destruction and death. Secondly, Clifton’s action brings about Almásy’s own death, years later, the Italian villa, as a sequel to his falling “burning into the desert” (*EP*: 5), after the plane in which he takes off with Katharine’s dead body catches fire.

Thus, like the sudden flowering of acacias in the desert – “Sporadic appearances and disappearances, like legends and rumours through history” (*EP*: 141) – the recontextualization of a past plot into the present reasserts how the theme of violence emerges from both stories, each one inserted in its own historical and fictional context: if Herodotus’ *Histories* concern the establishment of the Persian Empire and the Greek city states’ resistance to the imperial power, with the writer interrupting his main narrative with subplots, such as the Gyges and Candaules episode, and Ondaatje’s novel has World War II as an overall historical background into which he places the English patient’s subplot, individual, social and political violence impregnates both texts.

But if “narratives from the past, whether from history or from literature, structure the events and relationships of the present” (Bolland: 56), it is when we place Ondaatje’s plot inside Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” that we become aware of how the theme of violence can be framed by an even larger concept – that of mythical violence as an archetypal form, a concept that will then lead us to violence as an aesthetic manifestation.

As he deals with the issue of the legitimacy of certain means which constitute violence, Benjamin discusses the question of “whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends” by stating that natural law “perceives in the use of violent means to just ends no greater problem than a man sees in his ‘right’ to move his body in the direction of a desired goal, for “violence is a product of nature”, “the use of which is in no way problematical, unless force is misused for unjust ends”. “This thesis (...) is diametrically opposed to that of positive law, which sees violence as a product of history” (1986: 277-8). As he stresses further on, in his discussion of the nonmediate function of violence,

As regards man, he is impelled by anger, for example, to the most visible outbursts of a violence that is not related as a means to a preconceived end. It is not a means but a

manifestation. Moreover, this violence has thoroughly objective manifestations in which it can be subjected to criticism. These are to be found, most significantly, above all in myth.

Mythical violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends, scarcely a manifestation of their will, but first of all a manifestation of their existence. (...) Mythical violence is the bloody power over mere life for its own sake (...) [demanding] sacrifice. (294-7)

Applying these considerations to the Katharine-Almásy-Clifton plot, we realize that Clifton's rage, as a manifestation of the loss of power over his wife and thus leading to his use of violence, as seen, suddenly makes his explosion of violence acquire an additional horizon of meaning: instead of being just the means through which Clifton intends to pursue his vengeance by eliminating both Katharine and Almásy, violence becomes a justification, as he exerts his "bloody power" over Katharine's and Almásy's life, a power that, as an archetypal manifestation of his god-like existence as husband, demands "sacrifice" when rules are broken. In this way, individual violence is inserted into the timeless frame of mythical violence.

2. The transposition of the theme of violence in Minghella's *The English Patient*

In a similar way to Ondaatje's recontextualization of the Herodotus's subplot as the structural matrix for a new narrative, Minghella's transposition of *The English Patient* into film, and thus of one signifying system into another (Kristeva, cited in Jenny, 1976: 261-2), not only retrieves the original Gyges-Candaules story and the subsequent Katharine-Clifton-Almásy plot, but also, by narrowing down the other sub-plots concerning Hana, Kim and Caravaggio, simultaneously amplifies the Katharine-Almásy-Clifton plot by adding

new episodes, in this way foregrounding the illicit love affair, which thus becomes the main interest in the film version. Minghella's remarks that *The English Patient* "is above all a romantic film... Almásy and Katharine, the central protagonists... feel a fatal inevitability to their love. It's as if an irresistible force is bringing them together and they're helpless in the face of their destiny" (Bolland: 82) justify and corroborate the amplification of the tragic love affair, which thus overshadows the other story lines of the film version. As a consequence, in Minghella's recasting of Ondaatje's plot, the theme of violence and betrayal will also acquire a new significance.

The novel's translation into film has also been commented on by Ondaatje himself: "What is most interesting to me about the film is how scenes and emotions and values from the book emerged in new ways, were re-invented, were invented with totally new moments, and fit within a dramatic arc that was different from the book" (Bolland: 81).

This dramatic arc can be experienced in the film version by the presentation of the same initial and final image of Almásy's airplane flight over the desert carrying Katharine's dead body, "her shroud unfurling in the noisy air of the cockpit" (*EP*: 175). This image is followed, at the beginning, by that of the plane being shot down by the Germans and Almásy falling "burning into the desert" (*EP*: 5), while at the end it is followed by the image of their final flight together: "We moved and then slipped, years too late, into the sky" (*EP*: 174). The airplane thus becomes the structural element which binds the beginning and the end of their love affair as well as the implement through which violence is exerted, for it is by airplane that Katharine enters Almásy's life, as she arrives with Clifton at the explorers' campsite in the desert ; it is by airplane that Clifton leaves for and returns from Cairo while Almásy and Katharine experience a violent sandstorm inside a jeep; it is by using his airplane as an instrument of revenge, in his exertion of power and violence subsequent to his discovery of his wife's adulterous love affair with Almásy, that Clifton attempts to provoke the death of all of them, but is himself killed first in the crash; and it is in an airplane that Almásy, carrying the dead Katharine, flies over the shifting sands

and over the rocks and mountains of the desert towards the horizon, ending the film. The “instrumental character” of violence is therefore not only preserved but also foregrounded in the film, through the use of the airplane as an instrument of power.

Penetrating the dramatic arc of the screenplay and thus experiencing the use Minghella has made of the original Herodotus story and its recontextualization in the novel, we realize that, by re-inventing and adding new scenes to Ondaatje’s plot, he is further enhancing and thus enriching the development of the theme of passion, betrayal and violence. Various scenes confirm this:

- Katharine’s reading of the story of Candaules to the group of mapmakers, with Almásy watching her from the darkness of a tent with the desert fire between both, recasts the image of Gyges watching the queen undress, while the changes on his face reveal his being disturbed by the story, in this way foreshadowing the potential consequences of Katharine’s reading;
- suggestively dressed in white, Katharine’s attending a party with Clifton in a hotel in Cairo and then waltzing with Almásy will lead to their sexual attraction, even if the scene is still formal;
- Katharine and Almásy’s meeting again in the desert when Clifton flies to Cairo, unaware of the consequences his departure would bring, prepares us for the development of their sexual attraction, while Clifton’s words “Why are you people so threatened by a woman?” recontextualize Candaules’ reassurance to Gyges that no harm would come to him;
- Almásy and Katharine’s experiencing the sandstorm together marks the beginning of intimacy between them while simultaneously foreshadowing the violence of their forthcoming passion;
- Katharine’s going to Almásy’s room in Cairo, where, after provocatively slapping him, she has her dress violently torn open

by Almásy – who thus metaphorically re-enacts her words in the novel “I want you to ravish me” – also re-enacts, by extension, the queen’s order to Gyges to choose between possessing her or being killed;

- Katharine and Almásy’s bathing together in his bathtub, while Katharine is seen in her nakedness, recontextualizes the scene of the queen’s nakedness being seen by Gyges;
- Katharine and Almásy’s passionate lovemaking, not in the privacy of his bedroom, but in a room adjacent to a patio in which a Christmas party is taking place, emphasizes their violation of the social rules of marriage as well as those of behavior and prudence, for they might be discovered at any minute and almost are, by Clifton himself, dressed ironically as Santa Claus;
- Clifton’s seeing Katharine take a taxi and, while she and Almásy make love again in his room, staying in the taxi drinking and waiting for her to return, confirms his awareness of her betrayal, as the changes in his facial expression reveal, thus preparing us for an unforeseeable outcome;
- Katharine’s telling Almásy, as they are in bed, “Here I’m a different wife”, suggests her double role as wife and lover;
- Katharine’s saying good-bye to Almásy, while they are at a movie watching war propaganda and Almásy’s words “I’m not missing you yet”, followed by Katharine’s comment “You will”, foreshadow their coming estrangement;
- Almásy’s drunkenness at a dinner party, while he jealously watches Katharine, in black, dancing with another man and, in answer to his reproach, her asking “Do you think you are the only one who feels anything?”, anticipates again their mutual suffering;

- Clifton's violent death as he attempts to kill both with his plane, and Almásy's carrying the wounded Katharine to the Cave of Swimmers, where she dies while he is away trying to bring help to her, retrieves one of the most poignant scenes in the novel;
- Almásy's betraying the English by helping the Germans in order to rescue Katharine, as he did not succeed in convincing the English that he was not a German spy, changes the course of the war in North Africa, as mentioned, while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between Ondaatje's fiction and historical events;
- Almásy's return to the Cave, carrying Katharine's body to the airplane and then taking off with her towards the sky, only to have the plane shot down by German soldiers, brings the dramatic arch back to the original plot and ends the film.

In this way, the concentration on the development of the love affair between Katharine and Almásy through the device of amplification of Ondaatje's original plot, as well as through the "re-invention of scenes, emotions and values", has given the film version a different dramatic structure, but one that also enhances and further problematizes the theme of violence projected through the triangular love affair in the novel.

Considering the different kinds of violence dealt with in our study – individual, social, and political – we have arrived at the conclusion that the origin of individual violence in the love triangle in Ondaatje's novel lies in Clifton's violation of Katharine's trust, leading to Katharine's individual and social betrayal as a wife, to Clifton's pursuit of vengeance as justification of his god-like power over Katharine's and Almásy's life, and, again as a consequence, to Almásy's violation of trust by his political betrayal of the English in order to rescue Katharine. Having thus reached the archetypal form of violence by inserting Clifton's exertion of violence into the mythical frame provided by Benjamin, Ondaatje has aestheticized violence not only by

consciously recontextualizing a sub-plot from Herodotus into a contemporary plot, thus stressing how past historical narratives can shape and add further meanings to current relationships, but also by unconsciously making use of violence as an archetypal form of myth – in its sense of a “primitive explanation of the natural order and cosmic forces” (Cuddon, 1992: 562).

Minghella, in his turn, adds a further significance to the aesthetics of violence by using the airplane – the instrument through which the triangular love affair starts but preponderantly through which violence is exerted – as the structural element which binds the beginning and the end of the film, and which is photographed in unforgettable aerial scenes. Simultaneously, in recasting the love plot, Minghella re-invents and adds new scenes and emotions to the novel, such as the violent sandstorm and the passionate love scenes between Katharine and Almásy, while the shots of Clifton’s awareness of Katharine’s betrayal reveal emotions that have not been dealt with in the novel, thus anticipating for us an eventual violent outcome.

Thus, complementing Arendt’s words above about violence, Jacques Leenhardt’s statement that “fictional discourses have the duty to situate violence, to place it inside a living painting, to confer it the weight of experience through its representation, for only there can it produce its necessary effect: the effect of taking a stand” (cited in Lins, 1990: 15) makes us realize that the aestheticization of violence in both novel and film also induces us to take a stand, for the “reading” of a work of art is not an external exercise but one that creates, through aesthetic emotion, “social solidarity” (Bastide, 1971:17). At the same time that it unites us to Ondaatje and Minghella, through their concern with and sensibility towards the function that manifestations of violence and their dramatic consequences can fulfill in any fictional plot, it also unites us to these fictional but simultaneously historical figures created by the artists, and to their convoluted relationships, leading to our realization of the deeper implications that lie behind the statement “There are betrayals in war that are childlike compared with our human betrayals during peace.”

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