

## THE POETRY OF REVERSIBILITY AND THE OTHER IN *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

GERRY COULTER

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

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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).

...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).

Herodotus, at several junctures, points to what we may today understand as reversibility. Reversibility works to undermine all systems so that, through the proper functioning of what is, its reversal is produced (Baudrillard, 2005a:127). All great empires fall, and within the very success of every system lies its undoing. In the strength and success of the digital network which computing requires to thrive – 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 a strong antidote to determinism and linear theories of progress. In our time, reversibility has replaced dialectics. Ethics and morality are deeply troubled at the appearance of the reversible because they both depend on the idea of progress. In an important way then, everything which is – is the result of prior reversals and will, in time, have to make way for future reversions. Modernity gave priority to irreversibility but with the coming of the postmodern and postcolonial – reversibility reasserted itself as the primary rule. *The English Patient* [both versions – novel and 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 marginalised and the formerly marginalised occupy some of its former (now fluid) space.

Anthony Minghella's film (based on Michael Ondaatje's novel) announces one of its major themes – reversibility – 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. It is also a vast space of desire for it denies us everything. 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 which revolve around the events of a war which would open with lines of trenches or rows of crosses.

There are no borders in the desert as there are none in 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 lie the origin of 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 desert represents an ecstatic 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), invites us to think of her as 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), 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 a new 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] of the word, 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. Too many writing about this film have been diverted by the question of Minghella’s fidelity (or lack thereof) to Ondaatje’s novel. In postmodern 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. Let us say that the film and the novel work to destabilise each other and that Ondaatje and Minghella provide a dual text which usher new characters in from the margins. In the film we are given two hours and forty-two minutes to think about the novel’s primary lessons that we are all other to each other and that otherness is extremely complex. Indeed, it 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. 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. 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, 1993b: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, 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, 1993b:146, 174; 2005b: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* still works so well in our post postmodern and post postcolonial 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 wide 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. This is a pleasant way of thinking about the "silver screen" becoming a much wider screen.

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.

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**About Author:** Dr Gerry Coulter is a full Professor of sociology at Bishop's University, Canada. His essay "Jean Baudrillard and the Definitive Ambivalence of Gaming" appeared in the SAGE journal *Games and Culture* (Volume 2, Number 4, December, 2007:358-365) – also available on-line at: <http://www.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/2/4/358>. His recent

Article: “A Place For The Non-Believer: Jean Baudrillard on the West and the Arab and Islamic Worlds”, appears in *Subaltern Studies*: <http://www.subalternstudies.com/?p=476>; An essay “A Way of Proceeding: Joseph Beuys, the Epistemological Break, and Radical Thought Today” appears in *Kritikos: A Journal of Postmodern Cultural Sound, Text, and Image* (May - June, 2008): <http://intertheory.org/gcoulter.htm>; and his quarterly column for Euro Art (On-line) Magazine: “Kees van Dongen and the Power of Seduction” (Spring 2008) is available at: <http://www.euroartmagazine.com/new/?issue=13=1&content=156>. Dr. Coulter’s teaching has been recognised on numerous occasions most recently by Bishop’s University’s highest award for teaching – the William and Nancy Turner Prize.

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