FROM PAGE TO SCREEN: MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S
THE ENGLISH PATIENT AS FICTION AND FILM

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Let me begin with the description of a scene: “Is there anybody from Picton?”

The frail voice belongs to a young Canadian soldier who lies mortally wounded in a field hospital in Italy. It is 1944, close to the ragged end of the Second World War. The boy is a mess of blood, and he knows he is about to die. “Why Picton?” asks the nurse.

“He’s from there,” says the doctor. “Edge of Lake Ontario, right, soldier?”

This scene, from the opening sequence of The English Patient is a poignant one. But for a Canadian viewer, it carries an added element of sentiment. One is not used to seeing Canadians fight wars and talk about places like Picton in the movies - especially not in sweeping epics nominated and selected for nine Academy Awards. The English Patient is not a Canadian movie. But it is based on a Canadian novel, the 1992 Booker Prize winner by Michael Ondaatje. Two of its lead characters are from Montreal - even if they are played by a European (Juliette Binoche) and an American (Willem Dafoe). And the story, a multicultural narrative set on the quicksand frontiers of love and war, questions brute patriotism with a poetic intelligence, that seems in the end, both postcolonial and also distinctly Canadian. It is about identity.
The relation between literature and film has, in recent years, become the object of increased attention among practitioners of both the art forms. This interrelation, deeply related to the modernist world-view, finds fascinating expression through the works of modern literateurs, both for those who argue for the distinction of the two media as well as for those who believe that the two genres are parallel and analogous. In discussing the aesthetics of film adaptation, the basic question pertains to what the literary text gains or loses in the process of celluloid transposition. This paper proposes to analyse the 1992 novel *The English Patient* and its Oscar winning 1997 film version directed by Anthony Minghella in the light of the problem of adaptation. The history of Hollywood is full of writers made bitter by watching their work mangled onscreen. Michael Ondaatje is not one of them. He is so enamoured of the screen version of his novel that he’s been on a multi-continent promotional tour. He and the writer-director have even done readings together, performing scenes from the novel and film script. Because Ondaatje was himself deeply involved in the creation and promotion of this film - which has a more straightforward plot explication than the original polyphonic story - the case becomes more interesting. It is one of the few cases of adaptation which is brilliant in its execution, one which the author actually praises in a prologue to the published script (Miramax Books). Both men have nothing but admiration for each other, and for anyone interested in filmmaking, scriptwriting, adaptations, or just a good read, it serves as a rare phenomenon. Indeed, one might also argue that the film is not so much of an adaptation, but rather a transformation of the novel, a set of variations on a number of fictional themes and structures.
The English Patient grew from an account of a German spy who infiltrated Cairo with the help of an old desert hand. Ondaatje began reading texts by 1930s explorers in North Africa - men who were oblivious to politics. “These were guys who were obsessed with the surface of the earth,” he said. “A civil war could be breaking out 10 miles away, and they’re trying to find the right fossil.” In descriptive prose of spectacular beauty, he invents a desert world which is both physical and imaginative resulting in a fiction which “grows out of facts.” Refused to be shackled by the traditions of narrative, character and plot, in the novel, Ondaatje assembled mosaic-fashion, the lives of four shell-shocked occupants of an Italian villa near Florence at the end of the Second World War. The war-damaged Villa San Girolamo, its grounds strewn with mines, has gone from German stronghold to Allied hospital, its sole occupants now a young Canadian nurse, Hana, and her last patient, a man burned beyond recognition, who drifts in and out of his own memories and dreams. Into their lives comes David Caravaggio, an Italian-Canadian friend of Hana’s father but also a thief who has been used by Western intelligence, tortured and maimed by wartime inquisitors, and Kip (Kirpal Singh), a young Indian sapper in the British Army. So, the central story revolves around a dying man and two wrecks -- for David has become a morphine addict after his recent capture and torture, while Hana, who coped with the loss of her soldier sweetheart and their child (aborted), has been undone by news of her father’s death. Only Kip functions efficiently, defusing the land mines. Ondaatje superimposes on this tableau the landscape of the pre-war North African desert as well as Cairo, with its strange brotherhood of Western explorers, spying, Bedouin healing practices, early aviation - everything filtered through the consciousness of Hana’s patient. Though he claims to have forgotten his identity during the
fiery fall from his plane into the desert, it seems the putative Englishman is the Hungarian explorer (and sometimes German spy) Count de Almasy; but such puzzles count for less than his erudition (his beloved Herodotus is the novel’s presiding spirit), his internationalism (“Erase nations!”), and his doomed but incandescent love affair with Katharine, the bride of an English explorer - an affair ignited by the desert and Herodotus, and a dramatic contrast to the “formal celibacy” of the love developing at the villa between Hana and Kip, which ends (crudely) when Kip learns of the Hiroshima bombing, discovers his racial identity, and quits the white man’s war. Each of the characters is haunted by the riddle of the English patient, the nameless burn victim who lies in an upstairs room and whose memories of passion, betrayal, and rescue illuminate the book like flashes of heat lightning. Ondaatje himself admitted to Margaria Fichtner that his problem was that he did not really ‘have an exact plot.’:

My idea of a novel is that you’re really sort of discovering rather than telling it. You pick up a fragment, or you pick up a remnant of a situation, and you start exploring it or looking into what it meant: A plane crash in a desert. Who is this person? When is it happening? I think there’s always that sense of trying to unearth or clarify something. And even when you’re into the book a couple of years, you are still in that kind of state of just receiving or discovering all kinds of things. Any fragment of a newspaper or something someone tells you or an emotion will do. It is a sort of not knowing what’s in a dark room, and you strike a match. If I know what I was going to write about, I would be completely bored……It’ not like I’m obsessing: “Today I’m going to learn about this or that.” It’s much more whimsical. I didn’t know there was going to be a lot of bomb stuff in The English Patient., so when (the Indian sapper) Kip came into the story, I thought “Oh, this is kind of interesting. Who is this man? Is he going to be in the book for long? It’s a case of keeping as open as possible to the time.”
In the ‘acknowledgements’ section of his work Ondaatje mentions a long list of books which were important to him for his research. Yet he specifically mentions the fictional quality of it also, proving that private passions trump politics in all his novels, whether the obsession is the desert or a woman:

While some of the characters who appear in this book are based on historical figures, and while many of the areas described - such as the Gilf Kebir and its surrounding desert - exist, and were explored in the 1930s, it is important to stress that this story is a fiction and that the portraits of the characters who appear in it are fictional, as are some of the events and journeys.

In the novel, time is often recalled as a place. The unnamed ‘English patient’ dips into his well of memory and tells “stories….which slip from level to level”. His notebook is a copy, an English translation of *The Histories* by Herodotus to which he has added, “cutting and glueing in pages from other books or writing his own observations”, proving that Herodotus’s text is not fixed for him. Hana, too, is unconstrained by the static text and writes her thoughts in the blank pages of books and then hides them in the high shelves of the villa’s library. She reads aloud to the English patient in the evening, unconcerned with chronology or continuity. “She simply brought out the book and said ‘page ninety-six’ or ‘page one hundred eleven.’ That was the only locator.”

The film version of *The English Patient* as expected, differs from the novel in various aspects and drives at the heart of human motivation. Trying to give form to action, the story of the burned patient unfolds with a striking juxtaposition with the present. Despite some obvious stage shots, the beauty of the film is the method of telling the story. Relying very
much on a sense of mystery - it’s told in flashback, revealing bits of the story to the viewer a bit at a time. Unlike the book which is not about plot at all but more a series of flowing images than a coherent story line, much of the enjoyment of the movie stems from wondering who the characters are and what events led them to where they are, and discovering the answers a piece at a time. When Ondaatje was asked by the SALON interviewer what he felt when such a polyphonic story with multiple central characters was made into a film with a more straightforward plot explication, he replied:

I trust his (Minghella’s) directorial instincts. And I don’t know film. I do know that film is much more visceral, in terms of its effect on the reader. It’s much more immediate, and because of that it seems to be limited in a specific place. If a stranger dies in a movie, it doesn’t really affect us as much as someone we’ve followed for an hour and a half. Whereas in a book, you can invent a stranger on the last five pages of a novel, and give that enough empathy for the reader to be devastated,. I think that is one of the differences between film and books that is very interesting. In a book, you can suddenly leap to another world and bring that world into that room. So the choices made here aren’t so much about the politics of the movie-makers, they’re about the technical limits of film - a medium that can also give us something quite devastating by saying less.

When Ondaatje was asked if he felt it can be considered a Canadian movie, he told Maclean’s, “I hope so.” With an American producer, and English director and an international cast, the film “really was a mongrel stew,” he said. “I’m rather startled that the Canadianness survived to some extent, and I was always glad that that was there - even if Toronto was just mentioned in a torture scene.” (43) Still, the triumph of The English Patient raises some questions. There was even a hint of controversy, with charges that the movie glossed over the Nazi past of the historical figure who inspired the hero, Count Laszlo de Almasy.
According to Raymond Aaron Younis, the differences between the novel and the film can be broadly classified under three areas, namely (a) the story of Katharine and Hana, (b) The English Patient and the Other and c) A Story of Two Endings. Firstly, the film reverses the order of importance in relation to the two women. In the novel, Hana is the dominant character along with her patient – and it is crucial that he is her patient in a literal and metaphorical sense: she cares for him, and the reader is encouraged by the narrator to wonder why she has taken upon herself this unenviable task; but he also the catalyst of a number of crucial changes in her own life. The novel suggests that her growth and compassion, and her quest for a symbolic connection with the absent and painful figure of the father, are at the heart of the story. The film, on the other hand, simplifies her story considerably: the major point in the film is that she is motivated by the fact that she is a nurse. Many of the complexities and ambiguities that are apparent in the book disappear. When asked by an interviewer why unlike in the novel, Hana is a simpler and less damaged character and her redemption is easier in the film, Ondaatje replied that “the healing in the book takes much longer – there’s a sense of history, which a book can catch, but a film almost can’t.” Since the director decided to make the film into a love story with many melodramatic elements, Katharine is introduced much earlier and developed much more as an individual character. Unlike the shadowy and intriguing figure of the novel, here she is a much more dominant, passionate, beautiful and distinctive character who commands Almasy’s (and as a consequence, the viewer’s) full attention. The film also highlights her love and death to a striking degree: the most passionate music is reserved for her scenes with
Almasy; many of the most dramatic shots (Almasy lifting her from the shattered plane; carrying her to the Cave, leaving her, and returning to her belatedly), and many of the most poignant scenes in the film involve her. She is a fully realized romantic-melodramatic figure: she falls in love with another man, commits adultery, and in conventional melodramatic mode is made to suffer terribly for her transgressions and for her adulterous and passionate desire –just as her lover suffers terribly because of his love for her, and his associations with her.

The second major digression in the film occurs when the image of the Patient himself is changed to a remarkable degree - possibly dictated by the demands of melodrama and the visual requirements of the medium. The novel emphasizes the Patient as a figure who has no fixed identity - his identities - count, lover, spy, geographer, loner, poet and so on - are fleeting, fluid and difficult to pin down. His "facelessness" is another important attribute of his multiple-identities. In the film, his face expresses emotions such as sorrow or grief in relation to his past, or gladness and relief in relation to the treatment he receives from his nurse and the camera highlights a number of these in close-up. Also, the tragedy of the lovers in the film would have been undermined perhaps by the union of an Englishwoman and a committed German spy and hence the issue that he is a spy is deliberately glossed over, probably with the intention of making a male lover as attractive and not as suspicious as possible. As a consequence, Almasy is a figure who is ennobled, again in true melodramatic fashion, by the nature of his sacrifice. The audience, of course, warms to him even more, and as a consequence, feels more sad – more intense emotion—when his relationship with
Katharine ends with her death. One again, this is a good example of how the demands of the genre and of the medium transform the contents of the fiction.

It is also interesting to note that Kip’s role, as a wanderer and an outsider, which is quite crucial in the novel is very much diminished in the film. If he can be called an “other” in the novel in the sense that the represents the sometimes harmonious, sometimes troubled, attempt to integrate or combine different aspects of a complex self (trained soldier, loyal serviceman, hero, lover, subaltern, and so on), then his role in the film is more simple. He provides the love interest in relation to Hana and does his duty for the military. The troubled cross-cultural relationship evoked so vividly in the book are all but lost, perhaps because these issues would detract from the primacy of the love stories in the film, or perhaps because the traumas of decolonization and uprootedness are so disquieting that they may turn audiences away at the box office. (Or more cynically, perhaps these issues are too peripheral or too alienating to merit inclusion in a film which insistently draws attention to the lovers and their adulterous relationship in the desert or in the ruins of Italy.)

The end of the film is notable partly because it differs so substantially from the end of the novel. The film ends with a shot of Hana striding purposefully along a road that leads away from the architectural ruins in which she had completed her duty of care to the patient and this lovely blurred green flashing after that unforgettable shot of the plane over the desert. This is a striking affirming image, the sun is shining (a transparent melodramatic -symbolic element): and she seems confident, assured and crucially she seems to have been
healed, so to speak. The novel does not end like this at all. It affirms a mysterious connection across space and time between Kip and Hana:

And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (301-02)

Here the two lives seem to have developed independently of one another. Kip is married and successful and Hana is abroad. However, the novel insists on their unbroken connection in symbolic terms – there seems to be an implied continuity between the glass which is dislodged and the fork which is falling, and between the act of dislodging the glass and the act of swooping down and collecting the dropped fork. Perhaps Ondaatje is suggesting that this is the consequence of their earlier union or that there is something mysterious between them which the passage of years or of time cannot destroy; or perhaps he is suggesting that their relationship did not, cannot, end with their physical separation. The novelist had confided to his interviewer that he “didn’t know how to end the book”:

I end up with someone dropping a fork in Canada and somebody catching a fork in India. But I thought the stroke of genius in the film was that little girl in the back of the truck, this kid watching. Everything that Hana has been is passed to that little kid, and when she’s twenty years old, she’s going to remember that ride in the truck and that woman who got on the truck with her. I thought that was such a wonder, it was so brief, but that was the open door to the continuation of some kind of future. How do you do that in a book? God knows. You can’t get to that doorway. That’s an example of how film can do some stuff that books can’t.

Apart from the mere cataloguing of differences between the novel and the film, it is more worthwhile to try and trace out certain reasons why such transformations occur. Though
film theorists as well as literary critics constantly dwell upon the interrelationship between
the two art forms of literature and film, they also make us aware that both of them are not the
same medium. Thus the controversy about the relationship between novel and the film is
perhaps a hundred years old, beginning right from the early days of cinematographic history.
Though ideally the novel and the film should be regarded as independent entities, several
critics have harped upon the question of narrativity and fidelity to the text. Geoffrey Wagner,
for example, divided film adaptation into three “modes”: the transposition, in which a novel
is directly given on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference; the commentary,
where an original story is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect;
the analogy, which must represent a considerable departure for the sake of making another
work of art. According to the French critic, Jean Mitry, “a novel is a narrative that organizes
itself into a world, a film is a world that organizes itself into a narrative.” Mitry argues that
the adaptation of a novel to film rests on the absurd assumption that there exists a content
which can be transformed from one form of expression to another. But in art, the content
does not exist apart from its form. A change of form, therefore, results in another content. In
short adaptations result in a different thing. Whenever a viewer goes to see a movie made
from a famous novel, he/she is invariably led to expect a literal transcription to follow, and
because most of the time his/her expectations are not met, he/she is left with a sense of
betrayal. It is probably this difference that George Bluestone, the critic, had in mind when he
admitted that “the history of the fitful relationship between novel and film: overtly
compatible, secretly hostile.” In discussing the various problems of adaptation, another critic,
Joy Gould Boyum stresses on the notion of ‘fidelity’. “I’ve already suggested that a film
might be faithful to its source,” she argues, “to the extent that its implicit reading remained within the confines of that work’s interpretative possibilities, to the extent that it neither violated nor diminished them.” In the case of *The English Patient*, in spite of the director’s most sincere efforts of authentic adaptation, we are left with a negative reaction from the audience who feel that the ‘cinematic’ quality of Ondaatje’s novel is lost. Though Ondaatje - who served as the filmmaker’s unofficial muse during the shoot in Italy and Tunisia - is clearly pleased with the alchemy that has transformed his elliptical novel into a romantic epic. He justified all of the directorial changes which seemed to have an extraordinary subtlety - “Almost all of them seemed to be there for an intelligent purpose, as opposed to “Hey, let’s have more sex!” or something like that” he confided to Gary Kamiya.

In the post-modern politics of this novel, the novelist moves defiantly to a provocative sense of nation and community. Except for the nurse Hana, there is no Canadian setting in the story at all. In forms closer to Teshome Gabriel’s ‘travelling aesthetics’ (cinema) and what Giles DeLeuze calls ‘nomad thought’, Ondaatje opens both the community and aesthetics in the novel to all that is decentered, context sensitive, shifting, provisional and dispersive. Though such a novel seems to be apparently easily adaptable to the audio-visual medium of film, we get the Oscar-laden epic film which will be remembered more for the gorgeous Naveen Andrews who cuts a heroic figure and actually gets together with the delectable Juliette Binoche (something that most men aspire to). One prime reason for deviation from the novel is that the real challenge of adaptation lies elsewhere - not in the misplaced faith in the true-to-life replication of Ondaatje’s surface events, but in the inability of the director in finding cinematic equivalents to the tensions that the novelist inscribed into that web of
linguistic interrelations which constitute the text. Apart from the non-verbal signifiers - namely, music, iconic images, ambient sounds and other audio-visual manipulations which according to Joy Gould Boyum’s suggestion is also a ‘language’, it is the literary language which has no cinematic equivalents that poses the real problem and eludes adaptation. At the simplistic level, Ondaatje is not read in order “to find out what happened next,” as E.M. Forster puts it in Aspects of the Novel, but for what is written next and how it is worded.

Consider the following quotation:

It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of map, that pure zone between land and chart, between distances and legend, between nature and storyteller. Sandford called it ‘geomorphology’. (246)

This kind of narration certainly is very difficult to replicate in cinematography. To keep the film to its standard length, the director therefore takes course to ‘larding’ or ‘padding’ the text often with audio-visual pleasures exceeding narrative functionality. Thus we are left with a negative reaction from the audience to the director’s most sincere efforts of authentic adaptation.

Responses towards the film version of The English Patient have varied from total negation to loud applause. One anonymous reader from Toronto made the most interesting online comment: “Gossamer images clog the narrative leaving the reader with an impression of holding a cobweb - one is left reading nothing but air! Like A Room With A View, the movie is better than the book and the soundtrack is worth buying as well.” (September 23, 1998) Another reviewer from Boston recommended the book very highly but without seeing the movie or planning to see it at all. (October 6, 1998) When Margaria Fichtner asked
Ondaatje how he coped with his work which was once an undiluted work of literature and is now both the possession and the product of popular culture, the writer commented: “I’m just sort of coming to terms with that…Even now that I’ve seen the finished film, there’s really the sense that it is part of the book in some odd way, but it’s also completely different. It’s almost like somebody told me a story, and I tell the story, and somebody hears that story and takes it somewhere else and tells it in a different language, It’s very much that effect.” The most interesting response of course come from the novelist himself. Ondaatje said that screenwriter/director Anthony Minghella’s commitment to retain the novel’s fluidity of time and place did much to alleviate any author anxieties. Still, “this was a book that could only come from me, but now it’s just as personal to Anthony, We’re all sharing the story in a way now. It’s difficult and wonderful.” We can conclude with the ardent wish that instead of being frustrated, many more adaptations of popular novels should receive such positive response.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES


