The English Patient

Introduction

This interesting article has no author name, nor is it available online no.w If anyone of you know the author, please contact Kate Liu at kate@mails.fju.edu.tw. I found this article enlightening to read both for me and for my graduate students. If the author wants to delete it, I will do so right away.

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http://www.duke.edu/~sdk2/ep/epintro.html

Very rarely does a film complete its life cycle with the quiet dignity and unassuming grandeur as did **The English Patient.** It seemed that everything about the film, from its marketing to its release to the almost indifferent manner in which it captured award after award, carried with it an unassailable essence of the film itself: an air of understated, intellectual romanticism and pensive artistry. Of course, this is precisely the effect that the makers of the film intended.

In an industry that relies so much upon image, and to some extent upon how a film is *perceived* by an audience rather than how it is actually viewed, the marketing of a film is vitally important. What is the film's target audience, and how will they be attracted? What signifiers and beacons must be used and have in past uses enticed their viewership? In short, how must a film be generically constructed in order to be sold? All questions of marketing inevitably come to questions of genre, and of which generic elements of a film can be accentuated (and in some cases fabricated) in order to ensure the best possible audience reaction. A step beyond genre, though, and related to the above-mentioned signifiers and beacons, are aspects of *intertextuality*, or the precise utilisations of shared knowledge within a generic construct. Intertextuality is invoked whenever a film is marketed based on its principal star personae, or on the previous merits of its director or crew, or in the similarities between it and other films.

The English Patient marks a zenith in intertextual relay, a paragon of carefully crafted marketable imagery and assumptions. The factors contributing to its makeup, its marketing, its release, and its critical reviews are among the most beneficial for any film in history. The resultant product is uniformly the object of its own desire, in this case an enigmatic, wonderfully artistic, emotionally compelling love story that is at once complex and ultimately accessible. At least, that is what the marketing would lead one to believe.

The questions, then, become clear: how did such beneficial circumstances arise? What exact factors contributed to the successful marketing of the film? How have discursive practices (i.e. reviews and critical commentaries) reflected the impact of the intertextual relay? And perhaps most importantly, how did spectators actually view the film? Is it even possible, in a media-saturated culture, to arrive at a reading of the film that is antithetical to the media-forced view?

Commercial Procedures

http://www.duke.edu/~sdk2/ep/epcom.html

There was no media blitz, there was no market saturation. The overarching image of The English Patient was forged long before its release, before a single person viewed it, and part of that image was directly related to the lack of media attention diverted to the film's early stages. The sheer scarcity of advertising afforded the film an enigmatic, artistic quality early on. After all, there is a popular perception that "artistic" films do not need to and should not be advertised excessively, especially in specifically public arenas (such as prime-time television commercials). In this context, advertising is often associated with pandering to the lowest common denominator; why would a shrewd advertiser place commercials for **The English Patient** amongst ads for dish soap, used cars, and professional wrestling? In effect, the limited media exposure of the film contributed to its intellectual, almost haughty air. I can personally only remember seeing two television commercials for the film (in comparison to dozens for the other films of the time). This resulted in feelings of curiosity and quite a high level of interest on my part. Here was a film that was obviously superior to its competitors, yet it was being given as little television exposure as possible. Such strategic advertising heavily influenced my decision to see the film.

The perhaps begs the question of the film's target audience, and indeed if a specific audience was being targeted at all. Director Anthony Minghella seemed to have a definite target in mind: in an interview with Mr. Showbiz, he remarked, "The audience **The English Patient** is playing to is much more conversant with fractured narratives and with a more modernist style of storytelling." (1) This statement, combined with the enigmatic format of the advertising, begins to form a cogent picture of the target audience; in essence, the target audience is intellectual. They have familiarity with "fractured narratives" and are likely to be drawn in by puzzling, mysterious advertisements. Further, it is obvious from the Miramax trailers that the film is highly visual in a beautiful, detailed, classically romantic manner, thereby broadening its appeal to an informed audience. [Click here to view the trailer and TV spots.]

More specific information about the intended audience, and about the general intertextuality of the film, is contained in Miramax's press release and the official still photographs and posters. There are seven other films mentioned in the press release (listed beside the artist who was involved with each): **One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest; Amadeus; The Unbearable Lightness of Being; Truly, Madly, Deeply; Schindler's List; Trois Coleurs: Bleu;** and **Four Weddings and a Funeral**. It is quite interesting that these seven films are indicated in lieu of the dozens of others that involved the members of the cast and production staff, since each of the seven is either an intensely dramatic, artistic endeavour, or a complicated love story, or a combination of the two. From this can be surmised the intended categorisation of **The English Patient** among other films. Ralph Fiennes is to be associated with his work from **Schindler's List**, and not with his work from **Strange Days** or **The Baby of Macon**. Kristin Scott Thomas is to be associated with **Four Weddings and a Funeral**, and not with **Mission: Impossibl**e or **Angels and Insects**. Producer Saul Zaentz is momentarily forgiven his role in **At Play in the Fields of the Lord**. The author of the press release chose to intermingle **The English Patient** with these films for a reason: to provide a broad category into which it might fit.

This somewhat undefined genre is fleshed out by the two official movie posters, each one a study in photogenics. In the first and most famous, Ralph Fiennes is standing alone against a golden-brown backdrop, the mountainous horizon giving way to a dusky sky precisely at his waistline. He is staring pensively at something unidentifiable in the distance as the golden sunlight forms what must be called a halo around his head. He is ultimately masculine in this picture; his features are chiselled, rugged, almost dirty. A field of hallmark stubble defines his jawline. The caption above his head, suffused in the holy golden light, reads, "In memory, love lasts forever." The messages of the image are not overtly subtle, but striking nonetheless. Obviously, Fiennes should be associated with a mythical lover, perhaps of the unrequited variety. His presence at the vista of a panoramic mountain range seems to suggest that he is the proverbial master of his domain, yet his intensely disaffected staring over his right shoulder indicates a dissatisfaction with this condition. Clearly, there is something else over which he would rather be master, something to do with love. The result is an image that is appealing to both men and women, highlighting at once his unassailable masculinity and his willingness to abdicate his knowledge (hence his power) to the cause of love. In this case, the film is labelled as an emotionally challenging love story fraught with complex motifs.

The other official poster is perhaps easier to read. Encapsulated in the same golden light as the first, Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas are engaged in a passionate

kiss. It is an extreme close up of the two, with Fiennes in a dominant position. The desert is visible in the background, as is a bright, orange sun that seems to emanate from Fiennes' head. The message here is much clearer than before: this is a love story. In particular, it is a love story that focuses more on the man than on the woman, all the while maintaining senses of passion, heat, and artistry. It is worth noting that both of the posters are used as the front covers for Picador's re-pressing of Ondaatje's novel. In this sense, the intertextuality of the film has come full-circle: the novel inspired the film, which crafted images based on a popular interpretation of the novel, which was subsequently marketed using the film's fabricated images.

Clearly, a vast amount about the film can be interpreted from the posters, and both play an important role in relaying certain aspects of the generic conventions of the film. But even more information is provided by Miramax's still photographs available with the press release. There are twelve of these in all (including one of director Anthony Minghella), and taken together they create a unified feeling for the film. For example, in none of the stills do any of the characters exhibit an overabundance of emotion. Their faces are intricately composed canvases of intensity, each one wavering somewhere between soul-searching and seductiveness. In perhaps the most famous of these photographs (click here to view), Fiennes and Thomas are slow-dancing together amidst a sea of people. Their eyes are focused mysteriously: they each appear to be staring through each other's right collarbone. But there is an undeniable magnetism between the two, an indiscernible chemistry. It is both a rejection and a cautious acceptance, further compounded by the fact that Thomas' wedding ring is fully visible in the shot. This image relates the truly implied focus of the film: the doomed love affair between intellectuals, a societally unacceptable romance.

Beyond the industry-provided relays is the most important intertextual interface for a film based on a novel: the novel itself. Michael Ondaatje's scintillating book was uniformly hailed as a masterpiece, and has been the topic of all manner of study since its release. It has moved in and out of best-seller lists in dozens of countries. On the back cover of my copy, critics have hailed it as, "truly great, "magnificent," "wise and graceful," "a magic carpet of a novel." (2) These descriptions, and the intertext set up by impressions generated by the novel itself, have seemed to follow the film directly. Description of the novel paved the way for a certain interpretation of the film, an interpretation which theoretically would be insured by a faithful filmic rendering of the book. In other words, so long as the film remained remotely true to the text (which, in many ways, it did not), it was guaranteed the descriptions already granted to the novel. The critical response to the film proves true this premise, as one would be

hard-pressed to find amongst the criticisms a surplus descriptions unique to only the film or only the novel.

In all, the summation of available pre-film information reveals much about **The English Patient's** genre, audience, and intent. It is obvious that the film cannot be pinned down to a single genre such as "love story" or "drama;" the commercial information makes this clear. Instead, one is left with a collection of impressions that revolve around certain themes, such as love, loss, exploration, war, nationalism, and masculinity. This is, in a sense, far more appealing to the film's target audience, as the film denies itself a genre, preferring to skate the borders of existing conventions (much like the seven films with which it is associated in the press release). The English Patient all but declares itself too good for a generic label. But just how effective was this marketing, and how did the critics respond to it?

(1) The English Patient Central, Interview with Anthony Minghella
(2) Back cover, Picador Press 1996 repressing

Discursive Practices

http://www.duke.edu/~sdk2/ep/epdisc.html

Critical commentary for **The English Patient** is extensive. It is the sort of film that invites criticism, interpretation, and commentary: indeed, that is one of its selling points. It is an engaging film fundamentally, and left many critics grappling with its deeper meanings. This is not to suggest that all criticism was uniformly constructive, or even positive; on the contrary, despite the heavy intertextual relay from commercial sources, some critics took an antithetical reading of the film. However, even the most dismissive interpretations were based on critical expectations, and involved information based on the film's intertextual implications.

As an example, reviewer Betsy Pickle of the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* did not like the film at all. Her scathing review of it bordered on revulsion at times. But this review is prefaced with, 'Every decade has its clock-stopping, lavish epic of all-consuming passion set against a world of conflict and intrigue. If **The English Patient** is supposed to be that film for the 1990s, we're in trouble.' (1) Clearly, her expectation of the film was grandiose to say the least. The manner in which the intertextual relay affected Pickle was that it linked in her mind **The English Patient** with the 'lavish epics' of past decades to which she refers. She had a very clear generic construct in mind (reinforced by the fact that she mentioned no specific epics), brought about by

the pre-film intertext, but it was one against which she felt the film could not stand. Her argument as it relates to intertextuality is that **The English Patient** did itself in by defining itself too early as the potential 'love story of the decade.' Consider her statement, 'Dust, grit, and sand all figure into the story, but [director Anthony] Minghella should keep them in their place. Likening sand dunes to the curves of a woman's body ought not to be a film's sensual high point.' It is obvious that Pickle does not mean 'a film,' but rather, 'this film;' in other words, she would not have made this statement about any of the other films of the season. She felt that *this* film needed stronger sensual high points, because *this* film was supposed to be the 'lavish epic of all-consuming passion...for the 1990s.' What was for other critics an emotional apex was for her a deep disappointment; her assimilation of the intertext somewhat handicapped her expectations.

This of course begs the question as to whether or not it is possible to watch a popular film without handicaps. Judging by the balance of the critical commentary, it is not, as each successive critic relied in some way on pre-existing intertextual relay in formulating a review. Take as an example Roger Ebert's review for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He writes,

Backward into memory, forward into loss and desire, **The English Patient** searches for answers that will answer nothing. This poetic, evocative film version of the famous novel by Michael Ondaatje circles down through layers of mystery until all the puzzles in the story have been solved, and only the great wound of a doomed love remains. It is the kind of movie you can see twice -- first for the questions, the second time for the answers. (2)

Compare this with Miramax's electronic press release:
Based on Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning novel, [...] **The English Patient** is an epic film of adventure, intrigue, betrayal and love... [...] As tales of the past and present unfold, the characters reveal themselves to one another and two love stories emerge. [...] (3)
Note the shared themes and keywords in the two: both mention the novel, its author, and the fact that it is famous; both dwell on the enigmatic, mysterious content of the story; both highlight the past/ present dichotomy; both read the love story as being wounded or betrayed. This is a case of aggressive intertextual feedback: the critic nearly echoes the sentiments of the press release!

Ebert and in fact most all of the critics are unsure of how exactly to place the novel in their commentary. It is a delicate topic for them, it seems, and not one that bears a lot of explication. Ebert states,

Ondaatje's novel has become one of the most widely-read and loved of recent years. Some of its readers may be disappointed that more is not made of the Andrews character [Kip]; the love between the Sikh and the nurse could provide a balance to the do omed loves elsewhere.

Were this any other film, and any other novel, the critics would have probably destroyed the film at this point. In the novel, only a tiny portion of time is spent dealing with the memories of the English patient, particularly with his affair with Katharine Clifton. The bulk of the novel relates the present-day story about Hana, Caravaggio, Almasy, and Kip; the film all but ignores this portion of the novel as inconsequential. In other words, the film maintains a completely different focus from the novel, and serious critics who have read and intend on incorporating the novel should not allow such a matter to go unnoticed. However, Ebert summarises the position of all such potential critics when he states,

But the novel is so labyrinthine that it's a miracle it was filmed at all, and the writer-director, Anthony Minghella, has done a creative job of finding visual ways to show how the rich language slowly unveils layers of the past.
Instead of chastising the writer-director for shifting the focus and thereby perhaps the meaning of the novel, Ebert celebrates the fact that The English Patient even exists. This relates directly to the earlier point that the film would garner the praise of the novel so long as it was even an attempt at a faithful adaptation. The film touched the novel *just enough* so that the two could revel in the same compliments.

And revel the film did, for critical judgements upon it were overall quite benevolent. Of the more than twenty-five reviews I read, at least ninety percent were favourable. The film ranked a hefty 8.7 out of ten at the Internet Movie Database (which employs a system wherein anyone may vote on the ranking for a film; at the time of this report, 2866 votes had been cast). The film gathered nine Oscars and a Golden Globe as well. As a result, the novel has leapt back into the best-seller lists, and is selling as well as ever, sporting on its front cover one of the two official movie posters. The intertextual interplay here is palpable.

In all, the critical judgements of the film followed suit from the commercially processed intertextual relays. Reviewers enjoyed the film for its artistry, its fractured

love story, its mystery. Most importantly, they were willing to forgive the film's departure from the novel, because the commercial intertext asked them to. And when the film was dismissed or insulted, it was only in relation to the critic's media-induced expectations. These phenomena can be better explored by examining a particular group of spectators' lived cinematic experiences. How did people actually watch the film, and how did intertextuality and generic construction influence their viewing? To answer these questions, I will relate my own experience.

(1) Pickle, Betsy. 'The English Patient.' *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, (c) 1997

(2) Ebert, Roger. 'The English Patient.' *The Chicago Sun-Times*, (c) 1996

(3) The Miramax Official Site, (c) 1997

Lived Experiences

http://www.duke.edu/~sdk2/ep/epexp.html

Ondaatje's work had recently come to my attention through a friend of mine. I'd read two of his other books, but had yet to purchase The English Patient. (In retrospect, I very much wish I'd read the novel before I'd seen the film.) But I was nonetheless familiar with the basic ideas and themes of The English Patient, and with Ondaatje's general style, and this fuelled my complete surprise when I saw the first television advertisement for the film. I was actually shocked, if I recall, because I couldn't begin to imagine how an Ondaatje novel would translate to the screen, and, indeed, if such a thing was translatable or deserved to be translated. So I experienced initial reservations of an indignant, academic sort. Yet I was at the same time intrigued and quite curious. Could it be done? How would it be done? Clearly, this is just the sort of speculation that the early publicity was intended to elicit; members of my particular audience segment (in one sense, comprised of people who had a familiarity with the novel or the academic circumstances surrounding it) were supposed to be initially critical, suspicious, or enticed by the implausibility of successfully filming the novel. After the cinematic experience, I certainly echoed this reaction: 'I can't believe they actually filmed that,' I said. I, like Roger Ebert and the host of similarly-persuaded critics, was willing to forgive many of the film's glaring inconsistencies and what I suspected were blatant departures from the text due to the sheer massiveness of the task. In effect, my live reading was constantly affected by the intertextual interplay between what I knew of the novel and what I read into its rendering on the screen. And in the end, I simply reiterated exactly what I'd thought beforehand -- that the film

was a miraculous undertaking and worthy of praise regardless of its content, which was exactly the intended effect of all the pre-publicity.

The cinematic experience itself was quite unusual for me, for I had the pleasure of viewing the film with Duke University Ondaatje scholar Jessica Smith. We came into the experience with quite different backgrounds: I had a passing knowledge of Ondaatje's work, had seen several of the films encouraged by the Miramax press release, had seen two commercial television advertisements for the film, and had not yet read the novel. Smith, conversely, had not seen an advertisement (having only heard of the film through word of mouth), had not seen many of the associated films, and was quite well-versed in both Ondaatje's general work and particularly in The English Patient. Our attitudes were clearly marked in the beginning: I was optimistic, looking forward to a very artistic if not fully faithful film; she was pessimistic, scarcely able to believe that someone would have the audacity to attempt a cinematic translation of Ondaatje's complicated work.

Given these circumstances, it becomes clear exactly how intertextuality influences readings. I was much more attuned to popular culture, and to the various pre-film references espoused by all available commercial relay. I was expecting the level of cinematic artistry associated with Three Colors: Blue and the intense drama associated with Schindler's List, with a uniformly dreamlike, other-worldly feel (in the vein of Truly, Madly, Deeply). Smith, on the other hand, did not share the knowledge of these references and was thereby unable to draw upon them. Her only exposure to these films came as a result of their own commercial intertextual relays; i.e. she understood that they were supposed to be highly artistic or dramatic (for the sole reason that someone, somewhere had assured her that they were), but she did not have primary knowledge of them. I, on the other hand, had exactly the same conception of Ondaatje's novel, in that it had been described to me, yet I had not read it. We both used these individual knowledge bases extensively in our reactions to the cinematic experience, and our reactions could not have been more disparate. The scenes that I found moving, Smith found repulsive. The scenes that I found tedious, she found exciting.

There was one moment in the film in particular that demonstrated the extent of our different intertextual awareness. The scene is one of the most famous, occurring at perhaps the midpoint of the film. Kip (Naveen Andrews) has rigged a contraption of ropes and pulleys whereby he can lift Hana (Juliet Binoche) into the dead air of an abandoned chapel space. At this higher level of the chapel are painted beautiful, detailed religious frescoes, untouched by the ravishes of the war. Hana glides to and

from in mid-air, supported by Kip's strong arms, the only light in the musty space sparking from a single flare. As the scene drew to its conclusion, I half-turned to Smith and whispered 'This is beautiful.' She looked at me in shock, gasped, and said, 'This is disgusting.'

I was intensely moved by the scene. I thought that the use of space was brilliant, the lighting was spectacular, and the subtext and multiple layers of meaning were thick enough to provide endless hours of deconstructive analysis. The scene for me simply accentuated the high-art nature of the film, in fact exemplified it. Smith's adverse reaction, I later found out, was due to the fact that the scene from the novel is completely different, and has not a semblance of the meanings forced upon it by the film. In the novel, Kip rigs the contraption for a man he just barely met. It is one of the novel's multifarious mysterious, quirky digressions; yet the film not only altered the moment, but forced it to become an emotional peak. For someone familiar with the novel as intimately as Smith, it was an unforgivable offence. The whole film for her was coloured with these instances, yet these same instances were probably for me the most imaginative or creative. This is the manner in which intertextuality functions: it informs individual readings through use of shared or implied knowledge.

After we left the film, we discussed it heatedly. I defended the scenes she hate, while she found the film's most redeeming qualities in the scenes I despised. Overall, Smith rejected the film while I embraced it. The intertexts affecting her reading were far too established and too emotionally rigid to allow her a benevolent interpretation. Conversely, my reading was so heavily influenced by industry intertexts that I seemingly had no choice but to regard the film as successful. A clearer case of the effects of intertextual relay would be difficult to find.

Conclusion

http://www.duke.edu/~sdk2/ep/epfin.html

The manner in which a person views a film is inevitably altered by the intertextual relay they experience before the cinematic event ever occurs. This relay arises from innumerable sources, including commercial television and radio advertising, word of mouth, knowledge of shared cultural references, marketable star personae, and so forth. In the case of Anthony Minghella's The English Patient, these factors collided in a near-perfect manner, guaranteeing the film a distinguished position in cinematic history before it was even released.

The intertextual resources from which the film drew its strengths are among the most beneficial as a film has yet seen. It followed in the wake of a brilliant novel, capitalising on the text's image and praise. Crafting an enigmatic, mysterious, romantic image for itself early on, the film guaranteed the viewership of every single person dissatisfied with the season's offerings (which at the time included such films as Ransom, Space Jam, and Toy Story). Once it had this audience hooked, it enticed them with promises of fractured romance, emotional intrigue, and unparalleled visual artistry. Whether or not the film actually delivered these elements seemed almost irrelevant; its intertextual resources insured that it would receive the warmest possible welcome. And so it did, taking the film industry by storm, garnering all the necessary awards. After all, a film of the self-composed stature of The English Patient is supposed to be amazing, is supposed to gather awards. And in the process of gathering praise, it is forgiven its various transgressions against popular culture, against its source material, against the sensibilities of those who expected more from it.

The English Patient represents a new direction in genre studies, and in the navigation of intertextual relay. So well-crafted and effective was its marketing that it was destined to succeed. It did so without the aid (or perhaps constraint) of genre, without associating itself necessarily with a particular set of generic constructions. Undoubtedly, its images will become firmly rooted in cinematic history, and its lessons will guide the future of intertextual relay.