Cinema’s Imprinting of *The English Patient*: Self, Community, and the Gravitational Pull of *Casablanca*

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In his Introduction to *The English Patient: A Screenplay* (Eps), Michael Ondaatje assures us that “what [writer-director Anthony Minghella and producer Saul Zaentz] took from the book was its spirit and they always protected that” (xvii). Zaentz seconds the motion: the filmmakers have remained “true to it by capturing its essence, its spirit” (Coe 38-39). And Minghella, besides claiming (in the same interview) a “sensibility [that] overlaps very closely” with Ondaatje’s, mitigates any “sins of omission and commission” as being “made in the spirit of translating his beautiful novel” (xii). By appealing to “spirit,” then, all three assert an essential kinship, albeit a “translated” one, between the novel and the film — a fidelity that transcends the differences in media and “the stories [Minghella] chose to elaborate” (xii). Yet, unsurprisingly, none of the three ventures to define this “captured” spirit, supposedly passed into the film like Hana’s “plum plum” into the patient’s mouth (Eps 24).

If “spirit” may be glossed as the “lingering lessons” or “central message,” then it is my contention, to the contrary, that the novel’s lessons are largely lost. The film, however moving it may be, is fundamentally unfaithful to the motions of the book. Furthermore, while any argument for a “parallel” would be overstated, I will attempt to show that the powerful generic paradigms of *Casablanca* illustrate — and partly motivate — the direction of Minghella’s departure from Ondaatje. Eleanor Wachtel may be right that the novel has “all the resonance of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Casablanca*” (in Ondaatje, “Interview” 251), but it is the film version that resonates with these colonial dramas. The tune of the book is far more challenging.

What is the “spirit” or “tune” of the novel? Although some critics contend that the patient “convey[s] only one facet of a more complicated debate” (Goldman 182), the reader is in numerous ways
aligned with his final, postmodernist, postnationalist vision of people as “communal histories, communal books. . . not owned,” inhabiting “an earth that had no maps” (261). First, Ondaatje’s patient is pivotal not only in his immobility, so that the others seem to be his interlocutors, but also structurally: the title points to him directly, and the three central chapters are devoted to his narrative. Yet the novel’s being at the same time very much an ensemble piece — as the author’s own comment that Kip “fills one quarter of the novel” seems to confirm (“Interview” 253) — itself conveys communality. Second, the patient’s notions of fluid identities and communities are well developed throughout in what Stephen Scobie calls “the logic of the imagery” (94): the uneven, half-ruined villa; the fiery metamorphoses of bodies and hearts; the unpredictable Saharan sands; and the unfinishable symphony of Herodotus, ever supplemented by “pages from other books or. . . his own observations” (Ondaatje, *English Patient* 16). Third, the unusual interpretive demands that Ondaatje’s nonlinear fragments and intertextual excursions (e.g., into Kipling) make upon the reader reinforce that very sense of “communal stories” upon which the dying patient comes to rest. The novel’s spirit should therefore be sought by distilling “that well of memory [the patient] kept plunging into” (4) — the dark well from which he attempts to draw tales of solace for himself, for Hana and the others, and for us, the novel’s legatees.

Yet the movement of the “post-” that characterizes this spirit traverses the novel beyond the patient’s hard schooling in the fatal fixities of names and nations. 142 “La Marseillaise,” for example, appears twice in the text, once as the survivors gather at the villa and again as they disperse. The two versions of the republican anthem bring out the parallel schooling of Hana, whose transformative losses have been no less severe than the patient’s. At sixteen, Caravaggio recalls, she sang it with passionate formality, her hand on her heart; she “knew what the song was about,” its “cause pouring out so distinct, flawless, no hesitations” (53). And all were roused by her innocent fervour: “We stood up at the end” (53). But at war’s end, the anthem issues “into darkness” as “something scarred, as if one couldn’t ever again bring all of the hope of the song together” (269). It is “tentative” now, “altered by the five years” (269) — and this just after the patient’s climactic revelations (260–61), his repudiation of maps, and his insistence on his friend Madox’s “holy act,” a suicide “because of nations” (242). Just as “There was no certainty to the song anymore” (269), so too, by the end of the novel, there is no certainty to traditional concepts
Of course, the anthem's most certain and most rousing rendition in all of fiction must be the café chorus of *Casablanca.* The French republic, temporarily on its knees, is symbolically uplifted when its American counterpart (in the form of the proprietor, Rick, in his first step away from isolationism) nods to the band, allowing the Czech resistance hero, Victor Laszlo, to lead the patrons in drowning out the Germans' patriotic song "Die Wacht am Rhein." In fact, in the closing moments of the climactic airport scene, in which Rick "does the thinking for all of us" (at Ilsa's request), "La Marseillaise" is reprised, played sweetly on strings as a song without words. Here it becomes serenely complete in a way that is never quite allowed the lovers' ballad, "As Time Goes By." The "true romance" is as much that of the two republics as it is Rick's and Ilsa's in a bygone Paris. And as the opening credits feature (following the "Oriental" theme) a war-torn "La Marseillaise" foundering discordantly after a few brassy phrases, the final reparation of the anthem effects the novel's movement in reverse. In contrast with Ondaatje's growing uncertainties, the decisive strength of solid individuals will in the end set nations firmly on their feet in the face of fascism. Nationalism leads not to apocalypse and a tentative postnationalism, as in the novel, but to a modern internationalism, a fenced-off network of good neighbours.

Under the increasing influence of the media theory of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and others, recent accounts of the modern nation have linked its rise to that of the modern individual and argued for print capitalism as the basis of both. Benedict Anderson explains that, as the influence of sacred "truth-languages" and monarchs waned and history detached itself from cosmology, the "revolutionary vernacularizing thrust" of print capitalism "gave a new fixity to language, which . . . helped to build that image of antiquity so central to . . . the nation" as an "imagined community" (39, 44). The reading of novels and newspapers facilitated new concepts of measured time and a simultaneity of "meanwhiles," enabling the "idea of a sociological organism [e.g., the nation] moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time" (26). What is more, printed maps of unprecedented exactitude and reproducibility solidified a territorial consciousness of nations as bordered entities — a consciousness that also made more plausible a unified, bounded, and autonomous self akin to the Cartesian *cogito.* As Ronald J. Deibert puts it, "the two (individualism and state sovereignty) are complementary ontological
countersparts” (97). For print, according to Deibert, “favoured the distinctly modern idea of the sovereign voice, the single, authoritative individual,” bounded like a closed book (98). Moreover, the reading of books “in a quiet, private place” — as opposed to gathering around an oral storyteller — “in turn fostered solitary reflection, and private, individual points of view” (99). Thus, the (inter)nationalism and individualism that characterize the film Casablanca, and indeed America itself, are rooted in the paradigms of print.

For Aljean Harmetz, “no other movie better demonstrates America’s mythological vision of itself — tough on the outside and moral within, capable of sacrifice and romance without sacrificing the individualism that conquered a continent” (6). Given this formula’s evocation of the western, it seems fitting that Casablanca should feature a hard-bitten “saloon” keeper who kills the villain, Major Strasser, in a duel of pistols. “Your business is politics. Mine is running a saloon” (Koch 76), Rick informs Strasser and the local prefect, Captain Renault, unaware of the irony that his and the film’s “business” will turn out to be political through and through. There is even another continent to be “conquered,” cinematically at least — Africa mapped in outline from a bird’s-eye view, overwritten first by the opening credits and then by “The End,” having dumbly played its role of providing an exotic space for heroic adventure.

The “bordered,” tough-on-the-outside Rick has little use initially for “others” of any kind, it would seem — according to Carl, the waiter, “he never drinks with customers” (Koch 42) — and he is introduced playing solitary chess as if the game were a private book. Before the camera pulls back to this medium close shot, we see Rick’s hand in extreme close-up, casually authorizing a cheque: “Okay — Rick” (43).

In brief, Rick appears to be the ultimate print man, master of his own space: “You’re lucky the bar’s open to you,” he snarls, barring one would-be gambler from the casino (43). Of course, the black marketeer Ferrari’s loaded question — “When will you realize that in this world today isolationism is no longer a practical policy?” (51) — gathers resonance as the film progresses and Rick appears to emerge from his cocoon of cynicism. For such reasons, film historians have called Casablanca “Hollywood’s seminal wartime ‘conversion narrative’” (Schatz 203).

According to the standard interpretation, Rick “rediscovers... his love of woman and country,” and his “final heroics... crystallize the American conversion from neutrality to selfless sacrifice” (Schatz 203–04; cf. Nachbar 7, among others). In a pair of remarkable
coincidences, the film was ready for premiere just weeks after the Allies invaded North Africa (7 November 1942), and its release in January 1943 to national audiences came just as Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin were huddled in the real Casablanca. And although the "conversion" strategies already went far beyond Hollywood, Walter Benjamin in 1935 had been one of the first to realize the utility of film as a "most powerful [social] agent" (223). Film, for Benjamin, does not rule out contrary responses; however, when responses "become manifest" in a crowded theatre, "they control each other" (236). In short, the movie "sold the need for engagement. . . . Now the war sold the movie" (Harmetz 280). But how "selfless" is Rick's engagement? Even if duty calls Ilsa back into the family — "a durable institution had withstood the onslaught of fascist treachery, the film implied" (Baker 56) — does Rick not retain the print image of self-possession, of autonomous, American-style self-sufficiency?

This is not to say that such individuality is ever much more than a fantasy. From the beginning, Rick's "autonomy" is riven by the contradictions of the romantic subject. Having exposed himself in Paris to what Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake call the modern Western "myth of reciprocal completion," whereby "relations of love between individuals [are] held to be the supreme form of self-expression" (33), the chain-smoking, alcoholic Rick seems all too aware of his neediness. In Lacanian terms, he has experienced the "lack" in any self whose "supreme" expression turns out to be one of boundless desire for an ever-elusive other. Nevertheless, Jack Nachbar notes that such a cocktail of habits "would have linked the movie directly to the immediate lives of its audience" (9): from 1942 to 1943, cigarette production in the United States leapt fourteen percent, while annual consumption of spirits had risen by 1942 by an astonishing twenty-five percent to 190 million gallons. And Hollywood had not only begun to sell the war but also had for decades "extend[ed] the myth of romance to all social classes" (Lapsley and Westlake 33). Moreover, Rick's personal surrenders and dependencies at several important junctures are veiled, if not masked, by the celebrated plot.

For example, by situating romantic love in the past as a memory to be rehabilitated, the story allows Rick and Ilsa to have it both ways:¹⁰ "We'll always have Paris. We didn't have it, we'd lost it, until you came to Casablanca. We got it back last night" (Koch 175). Acknowledging a "reciprocal completion" that was (yet somehow is) lets them go their separate ways unburdened, though not without pain, and the possibly unsustainable idyll glimpsed in the flashback need not be tested. Nor
is there any need for Lapsley and Westlake’s either/or — “it is not the Paris depicted in the flashbacks but the one retroactively created by the tears in Ilse’s eyes that is the emblem of sexual rapport” (43) — when both/and seems to be clear. In any case, as the schmaltzed-up “La Marseillaise” reduces politics to an equivalent “reciprocal completion,” the successfully romantic, yet heroically single, subject remains free to join the Free French at Brazzaville (Koch 181) with his new companion, Renault. As with the personal romance, the consequences — another burden — are neatly nipped in the bud by the ending.

It may be the case, in Lary May’s terms, that “Rick joins what he has disdained: a military organization grounded in hierarchy” (150). But for the viewer, Rick remains the self-governing man of print: he is never seen in uniform taking orders, and “Brazzaville” has the ring of one of his earlier, “freelance” adventures, running guns to Ethiopia or fighting for the Loyalists in Spain. In effect, as Dana Polan remarks, the Moroccan setting’s tangentiality, “outside the official representation of struggle” in “unoccupied France,” creates a “space . . . for a fantasy of individual, unfettered power” (155–56). In sum, the film “figures conversion as the ultimate subjective and heroic act,” a “private, existential struggle” (153, 156). Like France, gendered individualism lives to fight another day.

Crucially, however, the “was/is” gap noted above needs to be bridged by music, which seemingly elevates love, be it personal or patriotic, out of calendrical print time and into the realm of the eternal. Indeed, one might even go so far as to say that, without music, the atomistic consciousness formed by the epistemology of print could not easily imagine or achieve molecularity. Anderson coins the term “unisonance” to account for such moments as the café chorus. Singing the national anthem or a patriotic song — the “echoed physical realization of the imagined community” — produces an “intimation of simultaneity” that connects citizens to each other across space and across time to the ancestral nation (145). In song, we must remember this: our kiss is still their kiss, as time goes by. Without “La Marseillaise” and “As Time Goes By” to unify consciousness and dissolve linear temporality into the glorious “forever,” Rick and Ilse’s parting would be harder to accept, and the national “conversion narrative” would have found fewer converts than it evidently has.

So why, in Ondaatje’s The English Patient, does “La Marseillaise” become a broken song? Why does Anderson’s unisonance no longer seem possible? Perhaps an answer lies in the ways in which Ondaatje’s
book of 1992, like all worthy historical novels, reenvisions the past through the prism of the moment, thereby illuminating both. An obvious example of this would be Kip's apparently "post-nuclear" reaction to the horror of Hiroshima, which has touched a nerve with certain literal-minded critics. Besides pointing out that "Kip has witnessed the effects of a variety of explosive devices," Jacqui Sadashige insightfully explains that "such eruptions of historical implausibility ... ultimately signal the imaginative consciousness that differentiates the novel as postcolonial and postmodern text from its characters as colonial subjects; they remind us of the impossibility, finally, of reading outside our own 'postnuclear sensibility'" (245). Sadashige's comments lead us beyond the obvious "implausibilities" into the very substance of the text. Few would argue with the application of the term "postmodern" — which has little time for "unisonance" or unities of any kind — to Ondaatje's poetic novel, but David Williams also connects the postmodern to a postprint culture. The motions of this printed book, Williams contends, "better fit the context of the digital revolution" than they do the bordered models of print and the "social context" of the wartime setting (227). The final convulsions of warring nations in 1945 thus offer the novelist an apt moment in which to compress dramatically the mid- to late-century shift in media and in consciousness. "I learn more from other media as opposed to books," Ondaatje tellingly remarks ("Michael Ondaatje" 244).

In keeping with his arguments for a "fit" between the medium of print and modern concepts of self and nation, Deibert proposes that "constructs loosely associated with . . . 'postmodernism' will flourish in the new communications environment" (178). The centred modern self exemplified by Rick and Victor seems less and less plausible in the age of hypermedia. The Internet enables the assembling of "data in different forms and from disparate sources," undermining print notions of individual authorship (182), while the traditional public/private division blurs as "more of people's daily lives . . . are folded into the interconnected, digital webs" (184). No wonder that "postmodernists conceive of the self as a networked assemblage without a fixed centre" (185). And given such free-flowing networks (the unstable "hardware" of the Internet analogous to the fluid "software" of the multiple self), national unities within borders are not only materially breached but come to seem counterintuitive as well. Nations must struggle for continued recognition between "fragmented niche communities" and an "embryonic sense of global
identity” (199). Thus, what I have argued constitutes the novel’s “spirit” — that is, the patient’s gesturing beyond the “broken songs” of nationalism and the modern individual — is consonant with late-century modes of communication and with the habits of thought that these modes continue to foster in the twenty-first century.

However, if Ondaatje’s novel is forward looking, the same cannot be said of Minghella’s seductively nostalgic picture, in spite of the film medium’s undoubted postmodern potential. Indeed, Stanley Cavell notes that the screen frame already has “no border”: it is “indefinitely extendible and contractible, limited . . . only by the state of its technology, and . . . the span of the world” (24–25). In addition, the fact that the viewer “can be moved instantaneously from anywhere to anywhere” (30) — not to mention anytime to anytime — means that film, too, can represent what Deibert calls a “networked assemblage without a fixed centre.” Of course, there are obvious reasons why postmodernist artworks have yet to reach the sort of mass audiences needed to finance a film such as The English Patient. But, while commercial realities (and perhaps cultural differences) must drive a wedge between novel and film, there is also the irony that the writer Ondaatje is a serious student of film, while the filmmaker Minghella is a respected writer. If anything, this seems to have deepened the divide, Ondaatje’s sojourn at the Canadian Centre for Advanced Film Studies evidently leading Ondaatje in a direction quite different from Minghella’s sentimental education in Hollywood (via Mr. Wonderful, following the British tear-jerker Truly, Madly, Deeply). According to Ondaatje in 1990, “the novel demands a comfort level of realism that is quite high. The equivalent of cubism or . . . [the] fluid cutting of film still hasn’t been allowed into the novel” (“Michael Ondaatje” 245). “I’ve learned from film,” he adds; “you can do on the page almost anything that film does” (244–45). In fact, the two versions of The English Patient demonstrate not only the fulfilling of this dictum on the page but also the ways in which films, at least popular ones, may demand a “comfort level of realism” even higher than what is currently expected of the novel.

Minghella’s departure from Ondaatje — which it is tempting to introduce as “taking the ‘post’ out of ‘postmodern’” — may be in the direction of “comfort” generally, but in more specific terms it smacks of the generic pull of Casablanca-style romance. Raymond Younis’s observation that the film “reverses the order of importance in relation to the two women” offers one clue to the nature of this gravitation (2). For the elevation of Katharine to a “fully realized
romantic-melodramatic figure" over Hana's "growth . . . [and] quest for a symbolic connection with the absent . . . father" (2-3) amounts to a key temporal and attitudinal adjustment. Instead of situating the patient firmly in 1945, bringing the lessons of war between nations home to Hana and the others, instead of burning the costs of nationalism into the viewer with an atomic flash, Minghella shifts the focus to the love triangle of the 1930s, his camera emphasizing the grandeur not just of the Bogart-and-Bergman-like passion but of the British project to catalogue Africa in the name of science and the Royal Geographic Society. Unlike the book, the screen version neglects the prism of its own, postwar era to valorize Romantic subjectivity: hence the film's nostalgia. If Minghella "makes it the work of the film to unmask and fix the identity of the [patient]," as Sadashige contends (247), then this identity is fixed not as Ondaatje's postwar and postprint figure of fluid communality but as the rather more solid prewar individual, the noble explorer and cartographer who has embraced a very British framework of modern identity. Even in the scenes of 1945, if the film Almásy has lived a "conversion narrative," it is the small (if excruciating) step into the role of English patient, not the novel's giant leap from mapmaker to map forsaker.

Arguably, such loners ranging across "unknown" continents blazed the trail for the heroes of the western and other American genres. Indeed, Minghella's Almásy, ever the man of print, has in some respects less in common with Ondaatje's patient than he does with Rick, whose "conversion" to the war effort, I have argued, leaves his print spots unchanged. For instance, Katharine encounters Almásy as in one sense the author of his space — "Geoffrey gave me your monograph when I was reading up on the desert" (EPS 27) — just as we encounter Rick in charge of his, authorizing payments and customers. When he is first revealed unburned, Almásy, too, has pen in hand, busily mapping oral directions into print, translating them into his own, English (not Hungarian) terms ("a mountain in the shape of a woman's back"). And, just as Rick replies to Major Strasser's question regarding his nationality with "I'm a drunkard" (Koch 69), we first make the burned Almásy's acquaintance as, with consummate irony, he brushes off an officer's inquiries into his origins ("You should be trying to trick me," etc. [EPS 12-13]). The key symbol of the spatial freedom and mastery that characterizes both protagonists is the airplane. In Casablanca, low-angle to worm's-eye views of the dream plane to Lisbon draw everyone's thoughts toward America, and in the end Rick retains the power to choose its passengers, he himself

Martin Dawes 149
keeping to the “flight path” of adventure. In Minghella’s *The English Patient*, as in Sidney Pollack’s *Out of Africa*, extraordinary Europeans soar over Africa to orchestrations shimmering with Mahlerian light, themes recapitulated over and over to link flight to transcendent love, the “supreme form of self-expression” in the modern West.

In fact, the film is just as effective as *Casablanca* at reconciling individualism with romance and reducing politics to a “private, existential struggle.” Like Rick’s, Almásy’s individualism is immediately evident, as he remains at first aloof while the others greet the arriving Cliftons. And, like the laconic American, Almásy (the “strong, silent type”) carefully rations his smiles, preferring to present a “closed book” to all but a few like-minded companions. Even with his best friend, Madox, his formality rules out directness in personal matters. When Katharine offers to paste her sketches into his Herodotus/diary, clearly an emblem of self, he curtly takes cover (“I should feel obliged” [*eps* 70]), and his definition of a “good day” is one of total silence (60). Of course, in Rick’s and Almásy’s cases, this emphasis on self-sufficiency serves to underline the predestining force of love, which, as we have seen, is in a circular fashion granted the unique power to penetrate the hero’s guarded borders to bring out in turn his own unique powers. By asking for Katharine’s drawings following their night of intimacy in the desert storm, Almásy does not relinquish his own authorship but includes her in his circle of privacy as a fellow author-creator.

In the novel, Katharine is sketchily evoked to be released into nature’s “communal book,” finally “anonymous, a naked map where nothing is depicted” (261). Conversely, the film resurrects her in extended flashbacks not to teach the value of release but to idealize both her person and the love to which so much has been sacrificed. And it is Gabriel Yared’s uplifting score that plays the key role in ferrying that love “from here to eternity.” In *Casablanca*, Ilse may not herself require revival, but through the resurrection and sanctification of love’s “unisonance” she can become both perfect lover for all time and ideal wife for the time being. Ilse knows that love’s supremacy can exact deadly sacrifices: “I wanted to tell you,” she says to Rick of the discovery that her husband was alive, “but I, I didn’t dare. . . . I knew you wouldn’t have left Paris and the Gestapo would have caught you” (Koch 157). In the film *English Patient*, the same order of love justifies Almásy’s strangling of a boyish soldier in the attempt to save Katharine. Love even seems to forgive Almásy the spy — if not the novel’s three murky years (1939–42), at least the desperate act that
threatens thousands, his trade of the precious maps for a means to
reach her. And love's inscription in the realm of the eternal means
that, having arrived too late, Álmási, too, is essentially "late": "You
can't kill me. I died years ago" (Ep's 167). When he brings closure
to his ruined body, Álmási lifts his own death up to Katharine's by
"replaying" her last written words through Hana ("Read me to sleep"
[170]), thus effacing the patient-Hana relationship so crucial to the
novel and its futuristic thrust. Instead of opening the floodgates of
"communal histories," Hana's final opening of the Histories leads us,
as it has throughout the film, into Álmási's private heart of darkness.

Ironically, whereas Ondaatje's patient feels the need to mentor the
people around him in memorializing those who once were close —
"You must talk to me, Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something
to be read" (253) — Minghella's Álmási is more often just that: a
book to be read by the camera, lodged in the library of the past. As
Williams points out, Álmási's Herodotus "becomes the vehicle for
cinematic mindscape," "a sign of the private mind" rather than (as
in the novel) an overflowing "figure for a collective text" (206-08).
Similarly, instead of employing a tale shared with Sam or Renault,
Casablanca enters the Parisian mindscape by dissolving from a close
shot of Rick's brooding features, wracked by his masochistic ballad of
choice. Yet given Ils's presence, she and Rick are later able to elaborate
the flashback verbally, indeed to finish and redeem it. Mutual
reminiscing ("The day you left Paris, if you only knew what I went
through!" [Koch 156]) allows them to do what Katharine and Álmási
are finally forced to accomplish separately — one in writing and the
other through the medium of Hana — which is to complete (with
music's help) the process of shaping their love into a Platonic form,
a thing of beauty forever. Conversely, how plural seem the patient's
conclusions in the novel: "We die containing a richness of lovers. . . .
We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience" (261).

Monogamy, of course, is one issue that illustrates generational
differences between the cinematic romances. Lebo explains that
the Hays Office, the "industry's self-imposed censorship staff," only
"permitted Ils's titillating line 'I was married, even when I knew you
in Paris,' to remain in the film because . . . she thought her husband
was dead" (104-05). The sanctity of marriage constituted enough of
an obstacle to romance to call for extreme narrative measures. Some
fifty years later, Minghella follows Ondaatje in apparently considering
the violation of those vows inadequate as a sign of love's consuming
inevitability and therefore has Katharine tell Álmási that what she

Martin Dawes 151
hates most is “a lie” (EPS 87; English Patient 152). And so her struggle to break away from her lover — “I can’t do this anymore” (EPS 121) — gains a certain nobility from the principle of honesty rather than, in today’s terms, a generic banality from adulterous betrayal.

Whereas the novel blames conflict and betrayal primarily on nations, the film seems to be reluctant to probe beyond the immediate personal relationships and the subplotted “debate” over Britishness. With regard to the film’s vision of community, Douglas G. Stenberg’s argument that “Both the film and the novel make a strong case against nationalism” (259) depends on a false opposition: nationalism versus internationalism. Stenberg’s evidence for a critique of nationalism consists of Almásy’s drunken mockery of “world leaders” (e.g., “His Majesty! Die [sic] Führer! Il Duce!”) at the “International Sand Club” dinner party (EPS 125). Still more relevant would be Madox’s disgusted reaction to the cancellation of international expeditions: “We didn’t care about countries. Did we? . . . It was something finer than that” (148). But caring about countries is not the main political problem in the film: these are not just world leaders but also expansionist imperialists, and the Sand Club represents no erasing or dissolving of nations but only their gathering in cooperation (and under the “royal” aegis, whether Madox and Almásy care to admit it or not). In short, Almásy the internationalist fulminates against tyranny, not nationalism. Thus, the film suggests that the solution to most of the characters’ problems would be the “nationalist” one of shoring up the threatened borders that in fact secure such international projects.

Minghella’s simplification, or rather denial, of the novel’s central problematic — his turning away from its tentative gesture beyond personal and national borders — again betrays the influence of Casablanca-style Manicheanism. For, like a latter-day Caesar, Major Strasser remarks smugly upon deplaning that “we Germans must get used to all climates, from Russia to the Sahara” (Koch 37). He is given the best table in Rick’s café because “he is German and would take it anyway” (65). Later, having witnessed the patrons’ rallying around “La Marseillaise” — for the Nazis an all-too-convincing display of both nationalism and internationalism — the major insists that the international café, like The English Patient’s desert expeditions, be “closed until further notice” (145). Once again, then, the political threat issues not from the nation per se but from the unambiguous evil of totalitarian hegemony. Meeting this threat demands that strong individuals and independent nations sharing antifascist ideals congregate in coalition to reinstate healthy divisions between peoples.
Postnationalism is not on the menu.

Ondaatje’s menu in the novel may offer a postnationalism of sorts — a global borderlessness printed in faint characters — but ultimately his characters defer the date of national dissolution. Following the novel’s nuclear climax, Kip flees to the “sun of India” (299), and Hana leaves the villa for her home and native land. But neither finds wholeness: Kirpal (though nominally whole) feels the need to “try to contact her” and “sees her always . . . . as if a camera’s film reveals her” (299–300), and Hana “has not found her own company, the ones she wanted” (301). What Younis calls their “mysterious connection across space and time” (7) in the novel’s concluding passage cannot but lead us back to Cavell’s remarks on the possibilities of film: “you can be moved instantaneously from anywhere to anywhere, and you can witness successively events happening at the same time” (30): “[Hana’s] 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” (Ondaatje, English Patient 302). Filmic as this ending feels, for Williams it is still more evocative of “the satellite perspective of our later world of global communications.” In other words, the narrator of 1992 conveys through this deft dovetailing our “dawning sense that people who live worlds apart are still instantaneously connected” (219).

Forward looking to the end, the novel thus resists the pull to nostalgic circularity and closure. Kirpal and Hana are not the only ones lacking wholeness. The mutilated addict, Caravaggio, is left literally walking a tightrope (297), and the patient must fade quietly away, suffering the shock of Kirpal’s condemnation, Kip “slammed in grief against the mural” (298). Conversely, as we have seen, the film Almásy determines the moment of his passing, floating back on Hana’s breath to Katharine and the Cave of Swimmers. The film likewise seeks wholeness by circling back from his death mask to the Tiger Moth and the soaring romance theme: the lovers are reunited in spirit, and as the credits roll the solo lament that once accompanied the lone explorer at last finds unisonance with the piano of intimacy. Yet the last frames have been Hana’s. Having climbed with a cheerful Caravaggio onto a truck full of Italians, we see her medium-close on the open bed, smiling into the wind, crosscut with the airborne lovers and then with her own perspectives: the sweet face of a child at eye level and, in oblique, low-angle views, roadside cypresses in the
blinding sun. Hana may not be “striding purposefully along a road,” as Younis would have her (6), but she might as well be.

Such transcendence and such optimism owe little to Ondaatje’s postmodernism and much to cinematic tradition. The most famous line in Casablanca, the conclusive “round up the usual suspects” (Koch 181), brings the audience full circle by recalling the routine of the film’s beginnings in another airport scene — “my men are rounding up twice the number of usual suspects,” Captain Renault informs the arriving major (37). As in the film English Patient, love has attained to ideality, enabling Rick to be reborn just as Almásy is in spirit. In flight, the husband, Laszlo, takes Almásy’s seat by Katharine/Ilsa in a more old-fashioned denouement. And Rick and Renault stride off into the future, just as Hana and Caravaggio ride hopefully into theirs, brighter now that the war is over.

Does Ondaatje’s English Patient deserve such “translation”? Careful readers of this elusive work might well say no: his pen refuses to encompass the desert like the heady camera of Minghella, and ultimately his patient refuses to be owned by England or the house of Almásy. I have argued that Minghella’s adaptation resonates with the genres epitomized by Casablanca but misses the novel’s postnational message as well as its critique of modern individualism. Furthermore, I have claimed that, ironically, these paradigms of nationalism and self-sufficiency owe more to the medium of print than to that of film. By contrast, Ondaatje’s paradigms tend toward the filmic and the cyberspatial. Even so, it would be foolish to deny that Minghella’s English Patient makes a wonderful picture. Moreover, Ondaatje’s letting go — his modest willingness to let the book become “a communal story made by many hands” (Introduction xviii) — seems thoroughly in keeping with its philosophy, however translated the result may be on screen. Yet one cannot but wonder what the film would look like if it shared the novel’s futuristic spirit.

NOTES

1 Ray Merlock calls Casablanca “the perfect Hollywood paradigm movie,” even going so far as to suggest that Titanic and Star Wars “use plot variations on Casablanca” (4).

2 This schooling is most clear in the patient’s confession of his role in the death of his lover, Katharine Clifton: “I didn’t give them a right name”; “Everyone with a foreign name . . . was suspect”; “the only name I should
have yelled . . . was Clifton’s” (250–51).

3 Besides countless patients, Hana suffers during the war the losses of her father, lover, unborn child (see 82), and eventually both Kip (288) and the English patient.

4 For more detailed demonstrations of the novel’s dismantling of modernist identities than I can offer here, see Williams 208–12 and 226–28; see also Penner on the “author function.”

5 Harlan Lebo notes of this scene that, according to contemporary accounts, “audiences all over the United States spontaneously rose to their feet and applauded” (190) — as Hana’s did the first time she sang it.

6 “Watch on the Rhine.” It is perhaps an unintended irony that, from a purely musical point of view, the two songs proceed in harmony until the outnumbered Germans give up — as if to suggest that the Germans ought to be on the same side as the others.

7 While irresistible to certain critics (Koch 187), the notion that the romance is actually homosexual (i.e., between Rick and Captain Renault) is a far less convincing gloss on the “beautiful friendship,” given the film’s politics. The international republican romance is also figured by the “café américain” itself, run by an American (and featuring American jazz music) yet after the French or Continental fashion.

8 Merlock notes that the internationalism of the whole production was emphasized in Warner Brothers publicity, which proclaimed that many cast members, representing thirty-four nationalities, were themselves refugees like those depicted in the movie. Thus, the project was seen to bear out some of its own messages and to demonstrate the American melting pot in action (4).

9 The only speaking roles for Moroccans would be bit parts: the obsequious “Arab Vendor” and the doorman, Abdul, played by a plump Caucasian (Koch 201). It may seem surprising, then, to find Morocco’s King Hassan sponsoring a gala in New York to celebrate the film’s fiftieth anniversary. But such is the cultural power of the Hollywood “eastern” that Moroccan officials “claimed that [it] has had an ongoing positive effect on Morocco’s image and tourist industry” (Jackson 36). The “Oriental” music, too, is one of the more dated aspects of the film, tactlessly described by Lebo as “bolstered by jungle drums” (183). And Sam remains for the most part an “uninvolved . . . creature of the old racial order [with] . . . no cause to be won” (Cripps 17). Even so, at least such original lines (from the play “Everybody Comes to Rick’s”) as “Play it, you dumb bastard,” were excised — for being “too racy,” according to Merlock, apparently with no pun intended (4).

10 Lapsley and Westlake argue that, in order to defer the romantic rapport (which in their Lacanian view necessarily fails), Hollywood movies tend to choose one of the following options: “that the sexual relation will exist, that it has existed, or that it would exist but for a particular set of circumstances” (42–43). *Casablanca* combines the second and third strategies.

11 Laszlo, though married, is another powerful individual. No Nazi prison
can hold him, and he does not protest when Strasser menaces him with his personal irreplaceability: “No one could take your place in the event anything unfortunate should occur” (Koch 108).

12 Harmetz describes the ballad as “[composer Max] Steiner’s main connecting device” (255). See also Lapsley and Westlake on romantic music generally: “it seems that harmony extends beyond the music to envelop the couple” so that “the impossible-to-say is . . . rendered present” (42).

13 “Post-nuclear” is borrowed from Scobie, who provides a fine analysis of this criticism and a defence of the episode on grounds of dramatic structure and imagery (94–96).

14 Ondaatje does not shy away from the more sinister aspects of this project. For example, in a colleague’s tent Almásy finds “a small Arab girl tied up, sleeping there” (English Patient 138).

15 That Minghella neglects the novel’s general critique of nationalism/imperialism (a point to which I shall return) in favour of what he calls a “debate . . . in odd places” over England and Britishness is underlined by his claim to share Ondaatje’s sensibility. Curiously enough he defines this entirely in terms of attitudes to Britain: “We both have the same degree of enthusiasm for things British, antipathy towards things British, intimidation about things British, and I think that’s the centre of my own writing and it’s also at the centre of his book” (Coe 38–39; emphasis added).

16 This observation is common in the literature; see, for example, Williams 212; and Younis 4.

17 Compare the novel: “Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (139).

18 The added influence of literary tradition lends this transcendence its Englishness, as Williams has observed: “The long white shroud trailing Katharine’s body out of the Cave of Swimmers turns Almásy into a type of Gothic bridegroom — Heathcliff digging down to the lid of Catherine Earnshaw’s coffin, desperate to be reunited with her decaying corpse” (210).

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156 Essays on Canadian Writing 84 (Fall 2009)


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