

[Not for Publication]

Vague Stirrings: Resistance in Orientalist Imagery

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The issue of Orientalism, if one were to date it according to Edward Said's fundamental text, would be over three decades old by now. By cultural studies standards, it would be old enough to have undergone the modifications and repudiations that usually render similar issues unrecognizable beside their original formulations. Yet the word itself continues to be encountered in a number of recent publications devoted to contemporary concerns, just as the concept of Oriental Studies, which Orientalism has made unacceptable, has been virtually replaced with Asian Studies and its variations in area studies.

In terms of classical film theory, however, critiques of Orientalism could not have arrived at a more opportune moment as they did when Said's *Orientalism* was published in 1978. André Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* volumes had just been translated from the French and published in the US, constituting as it were the last major pieces of classical theorizing in film. A consideration of the intertextual tensions between Said's and Bazin's works took a little longer, however, owing perhaps to the initially compartmentalized nature of their fields – sociocultural history on the one hand and film studies on the other.

Orientalism in itself has proved to be still vital, notwithstanding the reservations expressed against it from within the ranks of cultural theorists, for three reasons: first, criticisms of Said's ideas may have centered on the contradictions in his positions or the ultimate futility of his visions, but all acknowledge the importance of his formulation of Orientalism as an instance of a more enlightened but still racially implicated view of the West's Other; second, as already mentioned, Said's call for a reinspection of writings and activities throughout history in the light of Orientalist thinking is far from having been definitively accomplished; and third, the notion of an apparently benevolent though no less insidious approach to the study of non-Western culture has been the key to further considerations of racism and its historical transformations.

In this paper I will attempt to look more closely at the workings of Orientalist imaging from the perspective of a specialized realm of practice: a film, adapted from a novel, that inspects the consequences of American incursions in Asia, bearing with it all the ambivalence that such a project carried in the light of the US's historical position as a former European colony and its desire to become an Asian colonizing power. The US's only definite colonial success in Asia has been the Philippines, in the sense that the relations progressed, so to speak, from colonialism through neo-colonialism to possibly post-colonialism; while the text, titled

Reflections in a Golden Eye, is set mainly in an army post, during the time immediately before the eruption of the Second World War, when the colonial project was still in progress but the wider justification for stronger American presence in Asia, even after the vanquishing of European colonial forces, still had to be fought over.

The fact that we are dealing with a film version of a work of fiction that has been considered an aberration in the usual deeply humanist output of Carson McCullers clues us into the significance of the film adaptation (Figure 1). It will therefore also be necessary for an expanded version of this paper to trace the processes of thinking on Orientalism since the publication of Said's volume, with special focus on cinema, a realm of practice which, though passed over by Said in favor of critiquing literary texts, was regarded by then-contemporary philosophers as more vital in displaying social and historical modes of perception, proceeding from its effectiveness in articulating the perspectives of colonial power.

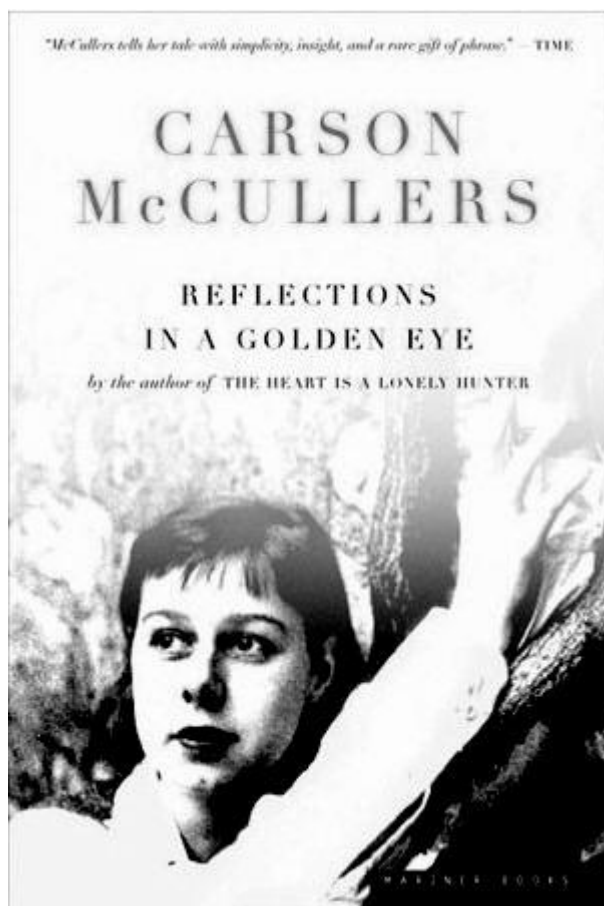


Figure 1. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* book cover with photo of the author.

Film as Colonial Tool

By way of further explication, film as a colonialist tool had proved to be hugely successful in



the US's imperialist success in the Philippines (de Pedro 26). Having purchased the rights to ownership of the country from Spain in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, the turn-of-the-century government proceeded to legitimize its claim by staging a mock battle, duly celebrated in early films by Thomas Edison, wherein American ships “defeated” the Spanish armada in Manila Bay. The US then was confronted by the anti-Spanish Philippine revolutionary army, in encounters, also celebrated in early American films, that decimated as much as a fourth of the country's population and foreshadowed accounts of atrocities decades later in Vietnam; to defuse mounting opposition within the US itself, the colonial administration declared the Fil-American war over by 1902, despite the fact that waves of regulars had to be sent over for the next two decades to suppress what the American government claimed were widespread instances of banditry.

Cinema fit in propitiously in this schema, since there was in practice no national language to speak of: the official ones, circa the 1936 Constitution, were English, which was imposed as a medium of instruction; Spanish, which was resented by the populace due to the refusal of Catholic and colonial authorities to allow the natives to learn the language during the Spanish regime; and Tagalog, which was the language of the Manila-based collaborationist region (cf. Lim). Despite the specificities of the Philippine cultural situation, the success of film in assuming the dimensions of a national language may have served to confirm convictions in the West that the medium had essentially universalistic properties. In fact, the other then-emerging superpower, the USSR, followed the same procedure as the American colony's interior secretary, Dean Conant Worcester, in legislating film as a primary propaganda tool.

Reflections in a Golden Eye was adopted for film in 1967, over a quarter-century since the novel's publication in 1941. Significantly, this was the year when the French New Wave's impact on the rest of Europe had finally managed to overthrow the only remaining stronghold of Classical Hollywood cinema – within the US itself, via the box-office success of and critical controversy over Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*. Director John Huston, who shared Irish roots with and displayed deep personal affection for Carson McCullers, arranged to have some scenes taken in Ireland, where McCullers was in declining health, and where she would die just before the movie's release. In cognizance of the then-brewing ferment in film expression, Huston had selected the singular McCullers novel that dwelled on psychosexual symbolism (Figure 2); he cast then-voguish performers such as Marlon Brando and the late Elizabeth Taylor, and insisted, though unsuccessfully, on a literal application of the title by tinting the entire film in a golden hue. More in the spirit of the 1960s cultural upheavals, Huston not only convinced Brando, who was initially resistant to the role, to play a closeted homosexual military officer; he also cast a non-white performer, Zorro David, to play the effeminate and unruly domestic helper that a homecoming American military couple would bring from the

Philippines.



Figure 2. Belgian film poster of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, with title translated into French and Dutch.

Unfortunately for Huston, reception to his adaptation was generally hostile, and though he was no longer a blockbuster talent, the film stands as one of his rare box-office failures. Critics were divided on the merits of the stars' performances, but were unanimous in expressing disapproval, if not disgust, over Zorro's character, Anacleto, as well as Zorro's performance (Figure 3). This has led to a film-and-novel Othering that remains exceptional in the body of work of both the author, McCullers, and the auteur, Huston. An additional historical irony for Huston is that he had built a reputation for expert adaptations and would continue to do so even after the failure of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and some of his most admired projects dwelled precisely on the issue of territorial expansion and colonization, as evidenced in his earlier adaptations of B. Traven's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, C. S. Forester's *The African Queen*, and James Helvick's *Beat the Devil* (screenplay by McCullers' nemesis, Truman Capote); and in his later adaptations of Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* as well as Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*.



Figure 3. Anacleto (Zorro David) demonstrates to his employer an expression for “grotesque.”

There would be further resonances in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*'s record of its star performers – i.e., in Brando's subsequent defense of his bisexual experimentation, and in Taylor's devotion to her gay male admirers, solidified in her position as leading supporter for AIDS research. These adjustments in celebrity lifestyles were consistent with the times and would probably have emerged regardless of what film projects Brando and Taylor were associated with. The more significant, and probably indexical, consideration is the obscurity that befell Zorro David (Figure 4), not to mention his character. I have been attempting to track down the Filipino performer since my graduate studies years in the 1990s, and the most I have come up with is a name associated with a few performances at the LaMama Experimental Theater in New York City, and some information that this individual, who might not even be the same person as the one in Huston's film, had moved to Florida, leaving no contact information available from the usual internet sources. Considering that all of the major celebrity talents behind the movie are no longer alive, it might be possible to speculate that David would be of an age too advanced to be requested to sit for an interview, and to discuss a possibly unpleasant, or even traumatic, showbiz experience.



Figure 4. Zorro David publicity still for *Reflections in a Golden Eye*.

A Fort in the South

On the other hand, we have the character he had fleshed out, from Carson McCullers' still-unfathomed inspiration. The links between the author and her character are more direct than we

might be led to expect, with their homosexuality as just the starting point. McCullers had never been to the Philippines, as far as anyone, including herself, has recounted, yet her understanding of Anacleto displays not just empathy, but also appreciation of his role as postcolonial intruder. There are acts and lines of dialog in the novel, some of them omitted in the course of streamlining the film adaptation, that indicate how she relished the cadence and humor of Anacleto's mannerisms. In one telling instance, where the film has Anacleto substitute the word "suddenly" for soon, with his mistress, Alison, correcting him immediately, the novel has Anacleto deliberately use the wrong word in talking to Alison's husband, Morris, with the knowledge that it would confuse and possibly annoy him, and with no one correcting him in this instance.

At this point it would be necessary to outline the main players in the narrative, duly announced in the opening of the novel but truncated in the film's quotation. In fact, the movie opens and closes with the same 16-word sentence, culled from the novel's first paragraph, which says: "There is a fort in the South where a few years ago a murder was committed." Significantly, the novel's next sentence, which lists the main characters, is dropped in the film: "The participants of this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse." McCullers' formulation signifies that her text will be multiple-character in nature, indicating a plot that will operate with three or more equally significant protagonists and that will resist conflation into either the traditional heroic narrative or the dual hero-antihero or hero-romantic interest structure.

In John Huston's film version this narratological configuration could not be carried over. The stylistic innovations of the French New Wave and the resultant intensification of European art cinema would be initially manifested in the US via the choice of themes as well as in audiovisual subversions of Classical Hollywood film language, including the recuperation of formerly derided commercial genres. The deconstruction of linear plot mechanics, or what I would call the delinearization of character-based storylines, would not occur in American cinema until much later, with the narrative experimentations impressively realized by Robert Altman, culminating in *Nashville*. In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, the filmmaking process operated on the assumption that the production had two stars, Brando and Taylor, as well as two supporting performers, Brian Keith and Julie Harris, with Zorro David listed ahead of the rest of the cast. Robert Forster was introduced, so to speak, and effectively distracted audience attention from the horse by appearing stark naked with the animal for their several scenes together (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Pvt. L. G. Williams (Robert Forster) on Firebird, both *au naturel* (DVD frame capture).

Brando and Taylor essay the roles of Major Weldon Penderton (an unnamed Captain in the novel) and his wife Leonora, while Brian Keith and Julie Harris play Major Morris Langdon and his wife Alison, both couples living in residences adjacent to each other. Forster plays Private Williams, caretaker of Leonora Penderton's horse, Firebird. It is the Langdons, played by supporting performers, who bring back the Filipino houseboy, Anacleto, after Morris's tour in the Pacific. Weldon Penderton displays symptoms of self-homophobia, which are manifested in his excessively masculine role-playing and his oppression of the effete Captain Weincheck, a classical-music appreciating bachelor and close friend of Alison Langdon and Anacleto. The obvious primary corroborator of her husband's desperate attempts to compensate for his sexual impotence, Leonora mocks Weldon with what he calls her slatternly behavior and carries on a fairly indiscreet affair with Morris Langdon (Figure 6). At one point she takes off all her clothes and climbs the staircase while calling her husband a prissy, saying "Son, have you ever been collared and dragged out into the street and thrashed by a naked woman?" Weldon screams "I'll kill you" a few times but crumples eventually in abject resignation. It is during this incident that Private Williams, whom Weldon had scolded for failing to follow his instructions in clearing the backyard for Leonora's annual party, peers into the house and gets fixated on Leonora. Huston underlines this moment by providing an extreme close-up of Private Williams' eye, with Leonora reflected in it. With the movie's intended gold tinting, restored in the DVD version, she becomes the first reflection in his golden eye.



Figure 6. The sexually repressed Maj. Weldon Penderton (Marlon Brando) and his earthy wife Leonora (Elizabeth Taylor).

Meanwhile, in the other household: as a result of Morris's negligence and owing to the trauma of losing her daughter before the baby had turned a year old, Alison had cut her nipples off with a pair of garden shears. This act, depicted in lengthy detail in the novel, is brought up in the film during a conversation between Leonora and Morris, prior to one of their illicit encounters. Weldon decides to take up Leonora's challenge that he is not man enough to ride her horse, Firebird. When the animal races through the forest and throws him off, Weldon whips it savagely, then finally breaks down and cries. At this point Private Williams literally crosses his path to comfort Firebird, as Morris watches the unclothed assistant perform his duties as stable hand. Leonora learns of Weldon's abuse of Firebird during her party, takes her riding whip, and beats her husband with it in front of their visitors.

Double Whammy

At this point two parallel tragedies, centered in each of the households, build up to their tipping point. Alison notices a man sneaking into the Penderton home, and thinking her husband has become too bold, she heads to Alison's bedroom, only to find Private Williams by the sleeping



woman's bedside, sniffing her clothes. She goes home to her husband, escorted by Morris, as Private Williams sneaks out, and declares that she wants a divorce and will be leaving next morning with Anacleto. Morris becomes more despondent with the departure of his wife and her helper, exacerbated when he learns that Alison had died after only a few days on her own, and Leonora once more falls into a sulking and quarrelsome mood, this time with her lover.

Weldon, meanwhile, seems to have finally attained a state of equanimity and contentment, and we realize this is because he has admitted his weakness for other men, particularly for Private Williams. This results in a triangulated state of secret desires – Weldon for Private Williams, and the latter for Leonora, for whose clothes he has developed a fetish. During the movie's climactic evening Weldon sees Private Williams attempting to sneak into his home, and thinking that the enlisted man has come to express a similar attraction and possibly consummate their mutual desire, he awaits in his bedroom. When he sees Private Williams go into Leonora's room instead, he takes a gun and shoots the intruder, thus waking up his wife and alerting her lover to the incident.

The story, as I have just told it, would also be the way that critics have recounted it. Yet in subsequent re-viewings, with cross-references to the novel, it became evident to me that Anacleto, although dismissed by most of the characters – most resoundingly by the guests in Leonora's party – is actually the presence on which the plot's themes and developments turn on. His initial appearance instantly foregrounds the very element that Major Weldon denies in himself – an assertion of a state of queerness, defiant in the conservative context of a military camp. He serves as a source of amusement for Alison (Figure 7), in much the same way that Firebird arouses both pleasure and tenderness in Leonora; both horse and Filipino, it may be noted, are the elements enumerated in the novel's first paragraph (starting with "There is a fort in the South," used as the film's prologue and epilogue) known to the rest of the characters by only one name. Most significantly, Anacleto serves as the Other of an Other – i.e., the civilian, colonial, racial, and sexual counterpart of Private Williams. Being male and lower-class, both of them serve their military officers' families devotedly, with Private Williams enjoying the additional privilege of being straight, white, and uniformed.



Figure 7. Anacleto (Zorro David) amuses Alison (Julie Harris), as much as he annoys her husband, Lt. Col. Morris Langdon (Brian Keith).

Yet it is Anacleto who enacts the final, perplexing act of anarchic subversion – by disappearing completely, and mysteriously, once Alison has died. In doing so, his presence in the narrative becomes ironically more powerful. Weldon virtually becomes him, in a manner of speaking, but Morris, the true-blooded American male who had served in the colonial outpost, begins expressing a disturbing fondness for his now-missing servant. Without Alison to confide in, Leonora has to contend with her husband’s excessive admiration for the life in the barracks, among enlisted men (side by side of course with the unmentioned Private Williams); then with Morris, she has to listen to how he wishes to have made a man out of Anacleto, so he could have saved the Filipino from what he described as “all that mess,” meaning high European culture. With Anacleto’s disappearance, the triangle mentioned earlier becomes a broken chain of desire: Weldon for Private Williams, who in turn desires Leonora, who desires Morris, who desires the invisible, idealized Anacleto. In this sense, the mutual affection between Alison and Anacleto, mistress and servant, is extended after Alison’s death, but with only Alison’s replacement, Morris, expressing desire, and the object, Anacleto, now gone.

Ironies

The narrative ends with the killing of Private Williams by the sexually scorned Major Weldon



Penderton. The terrible irony here is that Penderton will win the war of the sexes, if he retreats once more into the closet. One of Alison's last declarations was that Leonora was sleeping with an enlisted man, in addition to her affair with Morris – an observation which had led people around her to believe that she was heading once more for another nervous breakdown. By silencing Private Williams, Penderton will be able to parlay Alison's misperception into a condemnation, a reverse outing in effect, of the affair between Leonora and Morris, thus ridding himself of his castrating wife and duplicitous neighbor, as well as punishing his object of desire for betraying him, as it were, for his own wife.

The only ghost that remains, with the true potential for haunting Weldon Penderton, is that of Anacleto. Although the Major has effectively discredited Leonora and exposed Morris as an adulterer, Anacleto's specter could serve to remind him of a past that would be impossible to shake off: his homosexuality, his envy and hatred of men who had arrogated such freedom (to the point in which he wound up stealing a precious collectible, a phallic silver spoon, from Captain Weincheck), and most of all the devil-may-care capacity to enjoy life displayed by Leonora, who may as well be the woman that Anacleto sees when he looks at his reflection in the mirror. Just as Anacleto, platonically desired by Alison, had frustrated Morris's desire to possess his spirit, and Private Williams, sexually desiring Leonora, had frustrated Weldon's desire to possess his body, so, in a larger political analogy, has the development of a global underclass – in the US via the propagation of capitalism over the likes of Williams, and outside it via colonization – proved to be the element that serves to disrupt the continual deployment of masculinity, even an upright, racially uncontaminated, and militarized version of it.

In the narrative text of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, we are proffered an example of how the civilizing and Christianizing motives of colonization have been transmuted by history into a masculinizing project imbued with Freud's formulation of the predicament of desire (cf. Young). By providing a resistant subject who accommodates his masters' peculiar demands yet triumphs via disappearing into a faceless social system, the text serves to recall the standard response of natives forced into a state of submission: accept the terms of surrender dictated by the colonizers, then conduct guerrilla warfare when the opportunity to do so arises. It should come as no surprise to recall that, during the Filipino-American War, the Filipino revolutionaries' greatest military triumph was when they managed to overrun a local town occupied by American troops by dressing as women in mourning and concealing their weapons in the coffins they bore, assisted in their mission by at least one houseboy employed by a US Captain. The Americans declared victory not long afterward by the expedient process of exterminating nearly the entire population of the island as a form of retaliation, but the mark of fraught special relations, where the desired native lass could turn out to be a male assassin in disguise, had been able to provide a queering of the struggle, a condition that testified as much



to the ambiguity of Americans' investment in their country's colonial expansion as well as the creativity of the response of their Oriental targets.

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