DILEK INAN

Harold Pinter's Cinema: Filming the City

Introduction

Reunion

Reunion deals with a particular historical fact, the reality of metropolitan life in the decaying world of Stuttgart in Nazi Germany. Yet the scenario takes place in the protagonist's mind. His mental space shows the historical decomposition of the city and it becomes a real, physical sphere, which is implanted in every contemporary audience's mind. The film shows the city as an extension of the protagonist's own experience as a child; at present it is an alien place of his memories, the depositor of a frozen, historic past and a nauseating present.

Reunion was given a very limited release in the UK but, for the film critic Michael Ciment, "*Reunion* is Pinter at the top of his form."[3] The German painter, Fred Uhlman's Holocaust story is about the friendship between two sixteen-year-old boys in the Stuttgart of 1932: Hans, the son of a Jewish doctor and Konradin, the heir to an old German aristocratic family. But at the beginning of the film Hans is introduced as the seventy-year-old Henry

Pinter's repeated image of hanging butcher's hooks works as an absolute and a concrete reminder of the idea that "the same attitudes and denials which made 1932 possible are all too present [today]."[8]

The initial silent fragments of the past are cut off by the barking dogs and other sounds of Central Park. We switch from Henry's conscience to Henry himself, "sitting on a park bench, looking into space" (55). This park scene, in which his little granddaughter Alex is frightened by the dogs when she is in his care, makes clear that he has never stopped thinking about his past and his childhood friend, Konradin; his icy and distant past has continuously been active in his mind: he tells his daughter that he blames himself for Alex's shock in the park because "It's just that I was…my mind was…I wasn't paying attention" (56).

Although his daughter does not see the point of his pilgrimage to Germany, Henry

voice of Judge Freisler, a Nazi supporter, who in 1944 sentenced to death the German officers involved in the Hitler assassination attempt. The television presenter asks whether Freisler is acting the part of a cruel and sadistic judge, or if he is real. Henry switches off the television set abruptly, showing the unbearable fact that for him the past still haunts the daily life of Germany. This television programme stresses the present voyeurism in the German media: German people are now voyeurs, watching their own history which once participated actively in the most horrible atrocity.

This is followed by a scene in a hotel bar, which causes the old man's heart to sink again; a Japanese businessman tells him about a company developing superconductors to revolutionise electronics: "They're going to change the world. Automobiles will run on electric magnets. Pollution will be finished. It will be a beautiful new, clean world.… We're going to save the damn world and we're going to make a lot of damn money" (

divisive and agonising break in human history. Hans's description of *Hamlet* outlines the causes of this split effectively and metaphorically:

> Hamlet is a classic example of schizophrenia, of split personality. On the one hand, he laments the deterioration of civilised values, the decline in standards, the breakdown of moral systems, the failure of the state - and on the other hand he treats people like rubbish, kills Polonius without a sign of remorse, is vicious to his mother, drives Ophelia crazy, coldly sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths. The great Sigmund Freud would describe this as a classic case of schizophrenia (66).

Pinter returns to the concept of social schizophrenia when Hans's father describes himself as "proud to be a Jew—but I'm also proud to be a German!" (69).

As the son of an ambassador, Konradin has lived in several countries but thinks the beauty of Germany is unbeatable. Hans's mother agrees— "We do live in a very beautiful country. You should both...see as much of it as possible" (71)—and encourages the boys to cycle into the Black Forest where they are amazed by the beauty of a castle and agree that Germany "is the most beautiful country in the world" (73). But the innocent realm of childhood friendship, admiration of natural space and talk about their sexual desires, is dominated by a larger fact: a Nazi truck, pasting Nazi posters on the walls, is an index of forthcoming tyranny. The charms of the German pastoral scene are disturbed by the bustle of the city as "A truck drives into the square carrying SS troopers. They get out and begin to paste Nazi posters on the walls" (74). Hans and Konradin watch this as uninvolved spectators while their idyllic pastoral is eventually being colonised by the authoritarian metropolis: "Gradually, from the street, sounds of martial music through a loudspeaker, shouting, marching feet" (74).

In transforming the novel for the screen, Pinter said "avoiding sentimentality"[11] was the main issue. Consistently, the film moves from the sentimentality of "friendship" to a shocking reality that gradually infects the nation. While Hans's father believes that Hitler is "a temporary illness—like measles.… This is the land of Goethe, of Schiller, of Beethoven!

They're not going to fall for that rubbish" (69), the "temporary illness" grows into a rapidly-spreading tumour; in Pinter's words: "it is the conviction and the apparent innocence, which are so alarming."[12] Gertrude, Konradin's cousin, admires the Hitler Youth and is thrilled by the "new spirit in Germany. You feel it everywhere. I think they have the good of Germany at heart. I really do. So does Daddy. And Mummy" (78).

Another example of this disease is seen at the opera, where Hans spots Konradin and his parents. Konradin has to avoid him, because his mother hates Jews and he does not want her to insult his friend. The boys depart as the summer holiday starts; they have promised to stay friends, and Konradin insists they must not allow "all this—to spoil our friendship" (86), but when the new school term begins, they are introduced to a new history teacher, Herr Pompetski, who talks about the history that is about to be made by the election of The National Socialist Party. He warns the children against an "evil destructive force" which is "undermining our morals and poisoning our national heritage" (87). The trauma increases rapidly: while the Nazis whip up anti-Semitism, Hans is bullied by his class-mates, and this is when his father decides to send him to America. At the farewell, Konradin appears infected by the new German state in another powerful example of the "split personality." He tells Hans, "But the fact is we want a new Germany and we're going to get it.… Listen, I believe in Hitler … he has true passion. I think that he can save our country. He's our only hope" (90). Feeling betrayed, Hans leaves for New York.

The great theme of the Jews' plight under the Nazis—to which Pinter alluded so darkly and unconventionally in *The Birthday Party*, *The Hothouse*

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The Comfort of Strangers: Death in Venice

Pinter's adaptations of *Reunion* and *The Comfort of Strangers* should be read in relation to what he has written against: a culture of intolerance and oppression—the barbaric side of modernity. *The Comfort of Strangers* is another script that is infected with the catastrophe and corruption of fascism. *Reunion* shows a lived experience, the tangible atrocities in a foreign city, which relate to Pinter's own physical memory. *The Comfort of Strangers*, his screen treatment of Ian McEwan's novel, too, translates a disturbing notion of "otherness," another alien place of the characters' dreams and memories, but this time Pinter interprets the "other" foreign city as identical with Britain in the 1980s. The film shows the horrors of the "other" but also being the "same" as the other, which is more terrifying.

Between the publication of the novel (1981) and the film (1990), the United Kingdom

they are fatally drawn. Robert invites the young couple to his house: "My house is a thousand times more comfortable, peaceful, serene" (22). There is a parallel between Robert's house and Pinter's own "rooms," as all both have to offer is catastrophe instead of comfort. McEwan develops the feeling of unease in Venice early on in his novel:

> Colin's dreams were those that psycho-analysts recommend, of flying, he said, of crumbling teeth, of appearing naked before a seated stranger. For Mary the hard mattress, the unaccustomed heat, the barely explored city were combining to set loose in her sleep a turmoil of noisy, argumentative dreams which, she complained, numbed her waking hours; and the fine old churches, the altar-pieces, the stone bridges over canals, fell dully on her retina, as on a distant screen (12).

Pinter's adaptation starts to translate the unease through his characters, especially when Mary, having left her children in England, has difficulties in "trying to get through to the children." Similarly, Colin's first appearance reflects his disappointment: he "can't read this damn book!… It's unreadable," "*Pages slip from his fingers on the floor*," "*He slams the rest of the typescript on the table*" (Pinter, 4). Pinter shows Venice as a city that horrifically transforms the outsiders' lives. Foreign spaces embody, it seems, the fantasy of freedom. It is not only that the characters fantasise abroad, but also they use "*abroad*" as a space to name their sexual fantasies towards each other. Colin and Mary talk of their own fantasies about the sex machines that they imagine in their hotel room. However, they realise that in Venice the awful reality is silenced beneath the festive fantasy.

Despite the discontent, Venice is also portrayed as a space for fulfilling dreams, a tranquil place for romance and relaxation:

> While Mary did her yoga on the bedroom floor, Colin would roll a marihuana joint which they would smoke on their balcony and which would enhance that delightful moment when they stepped out of the hotel lobby into the creamy evening air (McEwan, 13).

McEwan describes Robert's apartment in a mood that matches the sedated state of Colin; as Harlan Kennedy put it in a review of the film, he and Mary "are invited to Robert's

appartamento—which resembles a cross between a venetian palace and an Oriental mosque seen through an opium dream."[18]

Pinter, on the other hand, mostly locates the characters in public places so that they explore the fatal city. Venice, with its squares, canals, terraces and balconies, seems delightful—all sunshine, gondolas, and long beaches—but Colin and Mary gradually encounter strange moments and menacing people in the dark alleys. Robert watches Colin and Mary wherever they go, with a supposedly helping manner which turns out to be menacing and fatal. Robert mysteriously follows them, takes photos of them, especially of Colin, and disappears suddenly.

Pinter's *flâneurs* explore the artistic side of Venice. They observe the Italian art, Carpaccio paintings and the "incredible" architecture of St. Augustine. Colin and Mary may as well be Pinter's own characters as both of them are linked to literature and art. Colin is a literary agent who has to read an "unreadable" book on holiday, and Mary is involved in women's theatre. Pinter gives more focus to Mary's involvement in this theatre group, which once presented an all-female Hamlet. Pinter translates Venice as a distressing, threatening and confusing place through the eyes of his wandering characters, reminiscent of his 1970s lyrical plays which also focused on the idea that the pastoral cannot fulfil his protagonists' dreams. Despite their maps, Colin and Mary frequently become lost. Gradually, the blind alleys of Venice lead them to the fatal menace. Venice dominates Colin and Mary. It becomes a place for transformation. In the novel, they become dependent on the hotel maid who does all the

Pinter, on the other hand, has more sympathy towards the protagonists. His compassionate dialogues reflect the characters' innocence. Thus Pinter's adaptation creates a more terrifying picture at the end through what happens to these innocent, playful lovers. Here is a typical example of Pinterian dialogue: Colin cuts himself as he shaves:

COLIN	Look. I think it was a pimple.
MARY	Tch. Tch. The girls won't love you any more.
COLIN	I think I need to eat more salt or something.
MARY	You don't need salt, you need sex.
COLIN	Can I have it with salt?
MARY	Why not? (6)

Venice, the city of self-estrangement, is drawn as a suffocating place, imprisoning people in its mazes. Mary says: "It's like a prison here" (21). In the maze the corners lead the stroller, the *flâneur*, to disorientation and alienation. This wasteland of mazes reminds us of Briggs's description of London's Bolsover Street in *No Man's Land*. Bolsover Street does not, of course, figure very highly in most people's dreams of fulfilment. Venice does; and for the young writer, Colin, its famous dim-lit alleys prove truly fatal. The image of the labyrinth is used repeatedly; Mary and Colin get lost and wander in the back alleys of the city looking for a place to eat before they are "rescued" by the stranger who is following them. Margaret Walters remarks that the characters inhabit "a labyrinthine oriental city that seduces and destroys Western visitors."[19]

The narrowing streets take them to the dark walls of iron-barred windows. When Colin and Mary are left in the labyrinthine streets of Venice, the camera at last takes us physically into Pinter's inner city, into "the blinding alleys" described in *Victoria Station*: Mary walks down the interconnected streets towards "*a long, dark, narrow alley*" (12). The protagonists and the audience follow the disorientating paths, dead ends and blind alleys to trace Pinter's narrative paths to the barbarism of oppression.

> I felt my father staring at me, staring deep into me. He chewed, swallowed. He put his knife and fork down, he looked at me. My heart started to beat, to thump, to beat, to thump.… He was God. He was testing me. And so I told him. I told him all that my sisters had done.… After dinner my sisters and I were called to my father's study. They were beaten with a leather belt, without mercy. I watched this (17).

Robert's stories make Mary "sick." Robert and his stories symbolise a sickening patriarchy, which kills resistance and limits freedom.

Robert and his wife Caroline work as a team: she drugs Mary with the drink and she poisons her with a narrative full of the sadistic and masochistic relationships of her strange marriage. After the drink Mary "*stands, sways, nearly falls*" (45). Caroline takes Mary to the bedroom in which the wall is covered by dozens of photographs of Colin. Caroline says that Robert has brought more and more photographs of Colin everyday: "We became so close, incredibly close. Colin brought us together" (46). Mary is shocked at Caroline's obsession with Colin:

> Then Robert brought you home. It was as if God was in our dream. I knew that fantasy was passing into reality. Have you ever experienced that. It's like stepping into a mirror (46).

Mary is paralysed by Caroline, and Colin is murdered by Robert. Caroline strokes Colin's body, Robert grasps his ankle, tips him on to the floor. He holds Colin by the throat and takes a razor from his pocket and flicks it open. From Mary's point of view the audience witnesses "*An unfocused mating dance with three figures. Sudden flash of razor blade. Blood.* ROBERT *and* CAROLINE *kissing*" (48).

> photographed; she dictated statements, initialled documents, and stared at pictures. She carried a sealed envelope from one department to another and was questioned again (McEwan, 122).

Pinter transforms the scene into an interrogation scene, which is reminiscent of his political plays and *The Trial*. The police endlessly ask Mary, "What did you want from these people?" "Did your boyfriend like the woman?" "Did you like the man?" "Why did you come to Venice?" "Were you looking for some fun?" (Pinter, 49-50). The film finishes in an interview room where Robert is interrogated by two detectives. In his letter to Pinter of 6 July 1989 from New York, Paul Schrader suggested that, "the police make a remark to either Colin or Mary or themselves that they 'know about' Robert—to indicate that this is not Robert's first foray into the seduction of tourists."[20] The detectives cannot understand, following a well-prepared murder plan, why Robert has left his razor with his own fingerprints, and has booked tickets under his own name and will travel on his own passport. Robert's answer repeats the absolute delusion of his father:

> My father was a very big man. All his life he wore a black moustache. When it turned grey he used a little brush to keep it black, such as ladies use for their eyes. Mascara (51).

As Francis Gillen puts it, "Robert wants to be strong like his father and at the same time seeks punishment for being less a man than his father."[21] Robert finds himself blinded by his Father's image. Finally he prefers the darkness. On the other hand, Pinter's draft of the script finishes in London. Mary and her children go for a walk by the docks where her son keeps skipping about. The image of "water pouring into the lock"[22] mirrors floating and danger; the draft suggests a moving between the canals of Venice and the Thames in London.

The Comfort of Strangers continues Pinter's interest in the masculine city. Although Robert holds women in contempt, and glorifies the male—"Now women treat men like children, because they can't take them seriously. But men like my father and my grandfather women took very seriously. There was no uncertainty, no confusion" (29)—his voyeuristic

control draws an ugly, brutal, male world. His childhood memories are about his dominating, terrifying father, who “nearly killed me” (18). In transferring the novel into a different medium, Pinter makes an alteration to its focal point. His script emphasises the loosely connected political issues, so that much of the film becomes an attack on the diminishing of freedom in Britain in the 1980s. It is about the close connection between sexual and political authoritarianism. Pinter is fascinated by the influence of fathers on sons and the connection between patriarchy and political absolutism. While exploiting Venice’s melancholy and corruption, he strongly emphasises his concern for the sickness of libert0(s)-1(he7 he)4(s)1(he7 ho02499 80

household, the Kafka screenplay reworks and develops the theme until the entire community becomes infected:

> I think bureaucracy figures very strongly in it, obviously. There's a very deep religious conundrum in it. A lot of people think that Kafka was writing about Communism. He actually wrote the book before the Russian revolution. His reference of course was the Austro-Hungarian empire. Prague, which we see in the film, has those great pillars, the bank, a very strong solid world indeed, with a worm of anxiety in the very middle of it. Looking back or rather, looking forward, you can see elements where a society in a very surreptitious and appalling way is grinding you into the dust.[33]

As in the preceding film-scripts, Pinter is visualising the urban environment, a masculine city. Pinter said "what you have is an apparently solid picture in every way—the buildings, the furniture, the money, the attitudes, and so on—within which there is a worm eating away."[34] He has shown the reality of metropolitan life in the decaying world of Stuttgart, and Venice. Prague is another decaying world, a terrifying wasteland under tyranny. His creative work for stage and screen does not uphold any given ideology but is altogether universal. Like the cities in *Reunion* and *Comfort of Strangers*, Prague is infected with the catastrophe and corruption of dictatorship. However, whereas *Reunion* explores a city in the memory—the depositor of a frozen, historic past—Pinter's city in *The Trial* is an emblem of a nauseating present.

The Trial's thematic and textual richness (a satire on bureaucracy, a prophetic account of the workings of Communism, a religious parable, a study of inherited Jewish humiliation) has attracted many adapters: Jean-Louis Barrault and André Gide in the 1940s, Jan Grossman in the 1960s, Orson Welles in 1962, and Steven Berkoff in 1970. All these adapters tended to portray Kafka as a prophet foreseeing the horrors of the twentieth century. For Pinter, the intention was more realistic as he explained in the publicity for the film:

> Kafka didn't write a prophetic book. With Kafka the nightmare takes place in the day. It's certainly not abstract or fantastic; it is very plain and proceeds in a quite logical way. Although it ceases to be logical when you try to examine it, you don't know where the natural flow of events slips into something which is totally inexplicable … I

felt it to be a very simple narrative. K is arrested and everything follows quite clearly

of the film. He complains that everyone is prejudiced against him, and that he is totally alone in this irrational world. The Priest implies that the trial is unending: “You don’t seem to understand the essential facts. The verdict does not come all at once. The proceedings gradually merge into the verdict.” Like the peasant in the parable told by the Priest who waits all his life outside the door, seeking admission to the Law, Josef K. puts his trust in some form of external salvation. In the end, he learns that there are no answers. The peasant in the Priest’s parable sneaks a “peek” into the building of the Law, waits “for days and years” (213); finally, as he approaches to the end of his life, a question which he has never put to the doorkeeper before dawns on him: he asks why, if all want admittance to the Law, no one else has ever shown up at this door during all his years of waiting. The doorkeeper stoops near the now nearly deaf man’s ear and bellows at him, “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, sopsn 7+(r)3(s)-1eN

through the outsider's eyes (*Comfort of the Strangers*), or the city dweller's (*The Trial*), he shows the same world of injustices. It is a world of irrational dogmas that one cannot question, and irrational desires that one dare not face. Around this time, Pinter said that he was horrified by the sufferings for which politicians are responsible. As we have seen, his political plays do not support any given ideology but are firmly internationalist. Having read *The Trial* at the age of eighteen, Pinter has lived with it ever since. Returning to the myth of social and mental dehumanisation in the 1990s and filming it in a post-socialist society after "the end of history," he affirmed that Kafka's city still stood as the central emblem for twentieth-century experience.

The preceding two film-scripts show Venice and Stuttgart as icons of a decaying patriarchy and fascism in Europe. *The Trial* translates a similar disturbing notion of the "other" where a repressive society erodes difference and resistance. Whether it is the great theme of the Jews' plight under the Nazis through the sentimentality of friendship, or eroding individuality, difference, and resistance through romance in a glittering Venice, or the corrupt bureaucracy through banality in Prague, Pinter's main concern is to arrive at the shocking reality and to criticise dictatorship that aims at the "purification" of society. Through film he finds a new language to describe various reactions against the increased globalisation of control, "monetarism" and the "free market" formed by Thatcher, Reagan and other supporters who promote the Radical Right's policies. The screen shows "other" places as a big obj-6(n)4(ons)-1 32ercal itydoueatthe "other"

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