Decomposing the Stereotypes: East-West Dichotomy in the Film Adaptations of W. S. Maugham's the Painted Veil

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Abstract
William Somerset Maugham's classical novel *The Painted Veil* (1925), in which a marital crisis is set against a cholera epidemic in China in the 1920s, and its three Hollywood adaptations (1934, 1957, 2006) feature a confrontation between the East and the West through the interaction between the Westerners, allegedly bringing progressive methods in dealing with the epidemic, and the local population. The ensuing tensions and contradictions are represented depending on the historical and political contexts of film production, predominant ideological trends and evolving attitudes towards 'the white man's burden' myth. As an expansion of previous research (Stanova & Peeters, 2021), the present work explores the visual aspects of power relationships between the representatives of the Occident and the Orient in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil.* The three film adaptations created in different historical periods reflect the attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs dominating Western society at the time of filming. The analysis of mise-en-scène, blocking and camera angles provides insights into the stereotypical representations of the characters' positions of power and a gradual restructuring of power dynamics in the most recent film adaptation. I argue that individual confrontations as presented in the film adaptations are expandable to a more general opposition between two different cultures and worldviews.

Keywords: William Somerset Maugham, Film Adaptation, Power Relationships

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Introduction

William Somerset Maugham's classical novel *The Painted Veil* (1925) starts in colonial Hong Kong, where, on discovering his wife's infidelity, the shy and reserved British bacteriologist Walter Fane decides to accept the post of a doctor in inland China and to bring his wife Kitty to the cholera-stricken town Mei-tan-fu. The novel has been adapted for screen several times in Hollywood, counting two Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer productions, *The Painted Veil (*1934, dir. Richard Boleslawski) and *The Seventh Sin* (1957, dir. Ronald Neame and Vincente Minelli [uncredited]), and the Warner Independent Pictures adaptation *The Painted Veil* (2006, dir. John Curran). The article by Stanova and Peeters (2021) explores the visualization of power relationships in the three film adaptations of the novel. Whereas the focus of the article is on the balance of power in a marital context, the present work shifts the focus to the power relationship between the representatives of the Orient and Occident in the context of British imperialist expansion in Southeast Asia as represented in the adaptations of *The Painted Veil*.

The analysis of the different approaches that the three film adaptations chose to visualize power relationships between their characters helps firstly to compile an overview of cinematic techniques used for highlighting the power that the characters have at particular moments; secondly, it allows to assess the evolution of the contemporary attitudes towards power dynamics in a colonial context in the decades between the adaptations. It is particularly relevant to consider this at the present moment, taking into account postcolonial approaches to both the source text and the first two film adaptations produced during the colonial era. The adaptations show the changing attitudes towards colonialist endeavours and the critical reassessment of the role of the Western interference in local affairs in the East. The film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* display a shift from the representation of the Westerners as bringing progressive methods in dealing with the epidemic to a more critical approach towards 'the white man's burden' myth.

The analysis of the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil*

The novel *The Painted Veil* has been studied, among others, from the points of view of colonialism and Orientalism; its film adaptations, however, have received limited scholarly attention. The film adaptation of a novel offers to the viewer concrete visual clues as opposed to the verbal descriptions and reliance on the reader's imagination in the novel. As suggested earlier (Stanova & Peeters, 2021), certain implicit elements in the literary work can gain strength and emphasis in a film adaptation through the visual elements, while visualization of a scene on screen can provide additional clues facilitating the interpretation of the relationship between the characters. Films being examples of a visual narrative, the scrutiny of power relationships between the characters is based on the detailed analysis of cinematography, mise-en-scène and various cinematic techniques. The present work continues to apply the angle of analysis that was efficiently used earlier (Stanova & Peeters, 2021): blocking (the actors' positioning and movements in the frame) is considered a primary source of information in clarifying the relationship between the characters and in the analysis of power relations between them. Such aspects as the actors' physical positions (standing or sitting) and the proximity of the actors to the camera can also serve as indicators of the characters' position of power.

In films, the visualization of power relations between (groups of) people can offer important insights into the attitudes and beliefs dominating society in a certain period. As Nick Lacey points out, films depicting events taking place during the colonial era can provide valuable

information about the society in which they were made and contemporary attitudes towards colonialism (2005, p. 283). He also argues that the changes in society's understanding of certain issues can be gleaned through comparing texts/films from different periods, and he makes an important comment that the way a represented group is depicted depends crucially on who is doing the representing (2005, p. 59, p. 270). Being influenced by social pressures and norms, filmmakers tend to attribute to fictional film characters "attitudes, gestures, sentiments, motivations, and appearances that are, in part at least, based on social roles and on general notions about how [a representative of a certain social or ethnic group] is 'supposed' to act" (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p. 84, p. 158). It becomes apparent that the historical contexts in which the films were created had a decisive influence on the representation of power relationships in the screen adaptations of *The Painted Veil*.

Written during the colonial era and depicting colonial Hong Kong and mainland China facing Western interference in its economic, political and social affairs, the novel *The Painted Veil* suggests a postcolonial reading. In a colonial context, power relations unavoidably come to foreground. Somerset Maugham described life in British colonies based upon his first-hand experience. Similar to his well-known cycle of short stories set in Asia, *The Painted Veil* provides a rich source of information on the relationship between the West and the East in the first quarter of the 20th century, as seen through Western eyes. In his seminal work *Orientalism* (orig. publ. in 1978), Edward Said states that the Orient was regarded in the West as "one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other", and the relationship between the Occident and the Orient was considered to be that "between a strong and a weak partner" (1995, p. 1, p. 40). In Maugham's novel, the image of the Chinese as the "Other" is distinctive; however, the representation of the relationship between the Westerners and their Eastern counterparts is not prolific in details which would enable the reader to easily visualize the distribution of power.

In what follows, the visual aspect of the interaction between Walter and Colonel Yu, a representative of the Chinese authorities in Mei-tan-fu, will be examined. Interestingly, in the novel Colonel Yu is a recurrent topic of conversation; however, he actually appears only in one scene, at Walter's deathbed. The Colonel is described as "a masterful man" possessing determination and a strong will, ensuring public order and containing the epidemic to the best of his abilities (Maugham, 2001, p. 76). As a local acquaintance reveals to Kitty, Walter has "got Colonel Yu in his pocket" (Maugham, 2001, p. 92), which does not clearly define the relationship between the two men. The scene of Walter's death, in which Colonel Yu watches Walter's last minutes with tears in his eyes (Maugham, 2001, p. 163), creates an impression of a sincere attachment on his part. Thus, the novel treats Walter and Colonel Yu as two strong personalities who contribute considerably to the fight against the epidemic. However, it leaves their personal relationship and the power relationship largely unclear.

Colonel Yu appears in each screen adaptation of *The Painted Veil*, although the significance of this character evolves from film to film. The 1934 adaptation clearly demonstrates the imperial gaze and the predominance of ethnic stereotypes. Walter's first encounter with General Yu (Colonel in the novel) clearly defines their future relationship: they exchange greetings as Walter is carried through the town in a sedan chair; thus, throughout their brief encounter (00:50:25-51) Walter looks down on the General (performed by the Swedish-American actor Warner Oland cast in an ethnic role, a common practice in Hollywood in 1930s [Berry, 2000, p. 119]), which emphasizes the former's position of power and authority. Even though in the next two encounters (00:55:31-00:57:08 and 00:59:32-55) Walter's domination is demonstrated through his authoritative voice, gesticulation and wording, the

first encounter between these two characters marks the subordination clearly and efficiently through the visual clues. The weaker position of the General is indicated visually in their last encounter, when the camera focuses primarily on Walter and shows General Yu first in the background through the window, then near the door (01:02:23-01:03:00). Walter, through his privileged position in front of the camera, occupies a dominating position, overbearing and overshadowing General Yu, who is made visually smaller through his positioning. He appears to be encroaching on Walter's space and pleading attention from his more powerful opponent.

Concerning the West-East relationship, *The Seventh Sin* (1957) appears considerably more neutral, which can be explained by the fact that the film was produced in the period of a rapid decline of colonialism. As Said points out, an important change took place during the interbellum when the Orient started to challenge the West which was entering a cultural crisis "partially caused by the diminishment of Western suzerainty over the rest of the world" (Said, 1995, p. 257). In the only significant scene involving Colonel Yu (performed by Kam Tong), as he greets Walter in Mei-tan-fu (00:32:33-00:33:40), he forms one of the summits of a triangle with Walter and the village elder, in a balanced distribution of power and authority. However, as Walter and Carol (Kitty in the novel) step up a gently sloping hill, Colonel Yu cedes the way and follows them. The Westerners thus acquire a dominating attitude when shown standing on a higher ground than their companions; they are also put in the position to lead the group up the hill, which demonstrates that even in an unfamiliar location they assume priority and exhibit their leadership qualities; their taciturn claim to preeminence remains unchallenged.

As McFarlane notes (1996, p. 37, p. 187), the time-lapse between the publication of the novel and the production of the film version influences the way the source text is rendered on screen as well as affective and intellectual responses of the audience to the two products. The most recent adaptation of *The Painted Veil* (2006) reflects important ideological shifts and variations in aesthetic and political climate that took place in the eighty years separating the publication of the novel from the film adaptation. With its careful treatment of East-West relationship, exposure of both Occidental and Oriental views and added scenes of nationalist protests in China, the film becomes a postcolonial adaptation of a literary work created in the colonial period, a "willful reinterpretatio[n] for a different context" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 153). It is important to note that the filmmakers may be motivated to regard the story from a clearly postcolonial perspective due to purely financial reasons: since the Reagan era the "overtly patriarchal and white supremacist images [...] have become poor box office" (Davies & Smith, 1997, p. 2).

Although the latest adaptation of *The Painted Veil* shows how people belonging to different social systems and world views work together towards a common goal, the intrinsic differences still remain. In the film, Colonel Yu (performed by Anthony Wong) has dignity and self-assurance, rather different from this character's subservience in the 1934 adaptation; he has a reserved attitude and a latent tension with regard to Walter's work in Mei-tan-fu. The more equal distribution of power between Walter and Colonel Yu transpires through the visual clues. Neither man appears to dominate the other at the beginning of Walter's stay in Mei-tan-fu as they are mostly shown standing next to each other or with the Colonel quietly and intently observing Walter from a distance. In the scene (01:09:58-01:11:00) of an open confrontation between these two men, Walter and his assistant are seated in the laboratory whereas Colonel Yu is standing, which necessitates Walter's looking up while addressing the latter. The three characters form a triangle, with Colonel Yu being the summit, personifying

the power vested in him in handling local affairs. As Walter's resentment at the way the Colonel manages the situation rises, he abruptly stands up and is shown as dominating his interlocutor with his height and posture while "respectfully request[ing]" (01:10:48-56) more determined actions from the latter. The abrupt change of position challenges their power balance. In the scene of the altercation with the local population concerning the displacement of the cemetery (01:11:45-01:12:12), Colonel Yu is shown standing higher on the uneven ground of the Chinese cemetery than Walter, alluding to his greater power at decision-making in this situation. Quite remarkably, two horse-riding scenes involving the two characters have similar mise-en-scène, showing Walter closer to the camera, with the Colonel more in the background (01:15:00-03 and 01:43:06-11). Thus, although positioned side by side, the way the characters are presented invites the spectator to see the scene and consequently the relationship between the two men from Walter's perspective. However, in the most significant dialogue between these two characters (01:15:05-01:16:17), in which they discuss the relationship between Britain and China, they are shown sitting next to each other in a perfectly balanced manner. They are representatives of two opponent nations and different cultures, struggling between their personal feelings and motivations and the pressure of tumultuous historical background, unable to extricate themselves from the policies and power struggle of their countries. It can be argued that personal confrontations as presented in the film adaptations are expandable to a more general opposition between two different cultures and worldviews.

Conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated how the visualization of power relationships between a Western doctor and an Asian military chief in the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* initially asserted the dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient. It has been laid out how the spatial relation of the characters indicated the power they possessed at certain moments. Moreover, it has been shown how the representation of the relationships between the Occidentals and Orientals in the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* evolved, moving from a highly stereotypical image of Eastern subjugation to Western dominance in the 1934 screen version, with fixed positions of power for the characters involved, to a more neutral relationship with indications of mutual respect in the 1957 version, to fluctuating positions of power in the 2006 film. The latest screen adaptation conferred on Colonel Yu the power and strength that he was denied in the previous versions. It can be concluded that the film adaptations of *The Painted Veil* reflect the leading discourses of their times and represent the characters following the contemporary attitudes towards racial (in-)equality.

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