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Harold Pinter's Cinema: Filming the City

Introduction

Films are especially valuable for Pinter, as through them he can show global landscapes and portray his characters' dreams, memories and fantasies. The film medium extends Pinter's reading and decoding of space. Through this medium he can reconcile mental space and real space—the physical and social spheres in which we all live. For a playwright screen is less restricting than the stage: “Of necessity, the stage is a confined space; the screen is a confined space, too, but the confinement is variable and shifts with the camera.”¹ The screen is fascinating in itself: what is mental and linguistic in plays becomes geographical and tangible in films.

From as early as 1962 (*The Servant*), Pinter has been continuously preoccupied by the transformation of text into image. He has achieved a cinematic body of work as significant as his stage work. He has worked together with leading directors of contemporary cinema—Joseph Losey (*The Servant*, *Accident*, *The Go-Between*), Jack Clayton (*The Pumpkin Eater*), Elia Kazan (*The Last Tycoon*), Karol Reisz (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*)—and he has forged a particular, low-key and intermittent partnership with the stage and film director David Jones (*Langrishe Go Down*, *Betrayal*, *The Trial*).

This paper focuses on three film adaptations in particular for several reasons: as Pinter's political development advanced in the 1980s and 1990s, his status as world-renowned playwright, in a theatre that was increasingly looking towards the political arena, became clearer. Pinter concentrated heavily on cinema meanwhile. Thus he experimented and surveyed different subjects and explored notions of self-consciousness. He looked at other people's works to enrich ways to reflect his main concerns and re-explore his own roots. But critics and academics marked this period as Pinter's end as a writer, a setback in his career. Nevertheless, films gave an overview that supported and reflected his political concerns. His film-scripts fitted in very well with what he was trying to achieve, for films are more public work than plays. And also, speaking at a British Council conference at Cambridge in 1999, Pinter insisted that the film adaptations were "acts of the imagination on my part." Certainly he wrote fewer plays but instead he created several adaptations for the screen; and it is wrong to dismiss this as a second-class activity.

The three films in this study, *Reunion*, *The Comfort of Strangers* and *The Trial*,² deal with the social problems of the time, and especially with the reality of metropolitan life. Pinter's screen versions retain some kind of literary sense especially when he chooses to depart from the source texts in order to visualise the urban environment. Additionally, his creative work was "about" tyranny abroad, but also about injustices at home and the ways Britain seemed to be changing morally. On the other hand, his plays make the actuality of this no-man's-land British and bourgeois. As his political convictions informed his whole output during the 1980s and 1990s, the foreign worlds, realities, imaginations and "other" cultures in these screenplays work as metaphors for Thatcher's Britain. All of Pinter's film-scripts are adaptations: he converts modernist monuments (Proust, Kafka) into the new medium; he adapts to make them popular, to make them public, so that a huge audience will share his ideas.

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 depository 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 Strauss, a New York lawyer, who returns to Germany long after the war. Returning to Stuttgart, Hans's memories revive as he looks for his childhood home, where his parents gassed themselves out of despair in Nazi Germany. Henry is now a displaced person, a wandering outsider in the streets of Stuttgart. His memories decode the picturesque city of his childhood, which has, due to anti-Semitism, been transformed into an appalling landscape. He remembers the day he met Konradin von Lohenberg, who was then a new boy at school. Despite Konradin's reticence, the pair soon became inseparable friends. Along with the themes of passionate friendship, innocence and faith, the film stresses the early days of Nazism, in flashbacks. Despite the presence of brownshirts in the streets, Hans's father, who fought for Germany in World War I, believes there is no danger. But as the boys become more attached to each other and discover the beauty of the Black Forest, the excitement of their friendship is damaged by the poison of anti-Semitism.

The film starts in black and white: silent, short, sharp scenes which are familiar to any contemporary audience. A line of men accompanied by German guards in the prison yard, juxtaposed to hanging butcher's hooks in the execution room, foretell the film's subject visually and economically. Pinter believes that "The responsibility of a screenwriter in adapting a book is to find the visual focus and condensation."⁴ And he is aware that "the contemporary film audience has such an advanced vocabulary that you don't have to be ponderous."⁵ The camera moves in and out of several distinct spaces introducing different times from past and present. Pinter introduces the protagonist by using silent shots as the camera moves from a schoolroom in 1932 when Hans (Henry) was sixteen, to Central Park, in 1987, when he is seventy. These introductory scenes announce Pinter's approach to the film as a journey in time through the protagonist's memories as Henry associates himself with the city of his boyhood, and reunites with it. The seventy-year-old Henry has believed all his life that he was betrayed by his best friend, Konradin, who chose to enter the Nazi Party while Henry's parents sent him to his uncle in New York for his safety. However, when Henry goes back to Germany after fifty-five years, he discovers a different truth, that finally his friend was not disloyal to him because Konradin was executed for his involvement "in the plot against Hitler" (99). This cathartic moment of discovery is accompanied by the very same initial images that introduced the audience to the execution room with the butcher's hooks. This is the moment when the audience sees that the introductory, short, silent shots map the final scene. The execution room—first peopled by a line of men and a tall man in SS uniform, then finally unpeopled—may visually work as a metaphor for "what is left of the Nazi past," which, as Pinter emphasised, "can't be erased so easily."⁶ Through his protagonist's memories, Pinter is unfolding and defrosting the frozen, historic past. His images are made to speak for themselves; in writing films he sees things "very concretely, very practically.... The thing has to make sense visually, otherwise it is not going to be there on the page."⁷ Thus

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 feels he has to "take care of this...thing" (57). Pinter sets out the protagonist's objective very early in the film, making it also a quest for the audience. Pinter said, "The most important decision Jerry (the director) and I made—which affected the whole structure of the film—was to bring the man back to Germany. The book has no such thing." ⁹ Henry's return to Germany shows his magnetic attraction towards the city of his mind, he re-associates and reunites with it, and investigates his past experiences.

As in *The Go-Between*, but to completely different effect, the present and past are intermingled. The past catches up with the present in the form of silent shots in present time. As Henry gets ready for the airport, the image of "*HANS swinging on horizontal bar*" from fifty-five years ago appears as a silent flashback (57). Similarly, a present-time check-in scene at Kennedy airport is followed by another past-time, silent shot, which presents his "*FATHER in officer's uniform with sword and Iron Cross standing next to a Nazi*" (58). After so many years he arrives at Stuttgart as a newcomer. In his hotel room, Henry feels the traces of the traumatic past intensely: a television programme about acting is interrupted by the screaming

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" (60). The same bond between profit and keeping the world "clean" is seen in Pinter's own play, *The New World Order*.

Modern Stuttgart is portrayed through Henry's eyes, as he strolls in the streets:

HENRY walking through the arcade. He passes a shop window containing guns of all sizes. A tramp sits on a doorstep shouting. He looks across the arcade at a McDonald's hamburger restaurant. A group of punks eating (60).

The scene is an emblem of civilisation and its discontents: on one hand are those, the businessmen, making a lot of money, on the other there are the homeless. Aggression, poverty and corporate capitalism are inseparable.

The film moves back to explore the boys' relationship and discover in detail the nucleus of the trauma which Henry has been carrying for fifty-five years. The director, Schatzberg, mentioned that the film expresses "through the friendship of two young boys, all the anguish of a tormented period."¹⁰ Pinter's careful approach to the book and the task of selection highlight a schizophrenia in the German soul which has caused perhaps the most

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*, and *Ashes to Ashes* is here constructed through the framework of a passionate friendship. With Pinter determined to avoid sentimentality, *Reunion* achieves its goal of portraying the destructive effect of dictatorship on human relationships. Pinter said,

What is left of the Nazi past is tangible in some respects, shadowy in others, possible in yet other respects, or simply non-existent among some of the young. But on the whole, I don't think they have really managed to overthrow the past. Because...it's probably the *strongest* imaginable in its impact on the consciousness of the people. No wonder it can't be erased so easily.¹³

Reunion, a political remake of *The Go-Between*, recalls his classic scripts of the 1960s for director Joseph Losey in its play of time and space. The bold narrative expresses what Europe still feels as Hans says, "My wounds have not healed and to be reminded of Germany is to have salt rubbed into them." Pinter used similar methods in his screenplays for *The Go-Between*, and *The Proust Screenplay*, in which the protagonist travelled in the fluidity of space and time through fragmented, unchronological memories. Pinter said, "The correlations—the interaction between the past and the present—were very demanding. Writing *Reunion* and trying to find the right punctuation and shape, I felt in my mind 30 years old again."¹⁴ "The past is a foreign country," but as Pinter has become a consciously global writer, he has introduced global landscapes to his films—other imaginations, other realities, other worlds. Speaking of *Reunion*, he said that Stuttgart in 1932 "is another world whether you are speaking English, German or whatever."¹⁵

Translating a disturbing notion of otherness, his 1980s films picture "real" places (especially in *Comfort of Strangers* and *The Trial*) as metaphors for Thatcher's Britain and a new changing image of England. In *Reunion*, Pinter televises the past through the present. His adaptation works especially well because it relates to the physical memory of his own childhood. Like his protagonist, he has been fascinated by Nazi Germany. He has read a lot about Nazi Germany, including a biography of Heidegger, who "was a Nazi" and "became a Nazi apologist," and a biography of Wittgenstein.¹⁶ The issues Pinter displays in *Reunion* might no longer have the cultural significance and historical position they did then, but this film is about another ruin in which Pinter searches for a glimpse of the redemption of humankind.

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 had undergone political changes that affected, utterly, Pinter's view of contemporary politics and play-writing. The connection between various fascist structures and impulses and the current situation in Britain appears even more clearly in his film-scripts. In just the same way, in *Reunion*, Pinter added lines to the Nazi schoolteacher's speech to evoke the disciplinarianism of Thatcher's government—"We will have order in this country," he says, "and I shall have order in this school" (88)—and by using the history of 1930s Germany, he drew attention to the threat of authoritarianism in Britain. In *Reunion*, the beauty of the Black Forest is challenged by the ugliness of anti-Semitism; space and nature are tainted by the disease of anti-Semitism. Similarly, the allure of Venice in *The Comfort of Strangers* is ruined by a figure who has become a broken product of a patriarchal, authoritarian society.

Pinter develops such images to analyse and criticise the dogmatic values in a patriarchal society, the horror of fascism, through Robert's narrative mental landscape,

dominated and colonised by the Father Figure. Pinter's seizure of Robert's narrative voice-over at the start refers to a masculine world which is in conflict with itself:

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. *Pause*. Everyone was afraid of him. My mother, my four sisters. At the dining-table you could not speak unless spoken to first by my father. *Pause*. But he loved me. I was his favourite (3).

The influence of fathers on sons and the connection between patriarchy and political absolutism are the central concerns of *The Comfort of Strangers*. Initially, the camera draws the attention to miscellaneous objects, the collected accessories—"dark oil paintings, carved and polished mahogany cabinets, two grandfather clocks, stuffed birds and glass domes, vases, brass and cut-glass objects" (3)—of Robert's father and grandfather, which he protects as a sacred memorial, a patriarchal tradition he has inherited. He reveals both his intense love and hatred for his tyrannical and sadistic father. He adored and feared him: "He was God" (17). As we shall see, in *The Trial*, Pinter focuses on a similar theme of brutal religion, which dominates and blinds the individual through fear and dogmatism. Pinter turned Ian McEwan's novel into a political allegory. The antagonist's love of the English government makes the film a metaphor for Thatcher's Britain. Despite its foreign location, Pinter's script attacks the decreasing of freedom in Britain in the 1980s through Robert's opinions that refer to the English government:

First and foremost society has to be protected from perverts. Everybody knows that. My philosophical position is simple—put them all up against a wall and shoot them. What society needs to do is purify itself. The English Government is going in the right direction. In Italy we could learn a lot of lessons from the English Government (30-1).

Ian McEwan uses an allusion to explain the core image of his novel: a quotation from Adrienne Rich lays out the strong icon of patriarchy as a source of evil in society:

how we dwelt in two worlds
the daughters and the mothers
in the kingdom of the sons¹⁷

In addition to the monopoly of patriarchy, Pinter's adaptation becomes a contempt of matriarchy, too, through Robert's admiration for the English government—the Thatcherite years of the 1980s. Although Pinter stays faithful to the story-line of the novel, he adds dialogue to sharpen its social and political connections. In the dinner scene in Robert's apartment, Mary questions the meaning of "freedom" in contemporary Britain after Robert praises the English conservative government. Whereas, in the novel, the conversation takes place at Robert's bar and concentrates on his new manager, in the film it becomes a debate about British politics and the decay of basic liberties. Pinter once more puts emphasis on his conscientious interest: he studies various portraits of the torture and murder of the non-conformist in the name of "purifying society."

Colin disagrees with Robert on his praise of the English government. To this, Robert responds threateningly:

I respect you as an Englishman, but not if you're a communist poof. You're not a poof, are you? That's the right word, no? Or is it 'fruit'? Talking about fruit—it's time for coffee (31).

He uses a cryptic language: both hostile and apparently friendly at the same time. Here Robert deliberately guarantees that he has the power to employ his arbitrary language to confine his victims. He autocratically defines Colin as "a Communist poof" or a "fruit." Similarly, Pinter's 1980s plays deal with the horrors of this inaccurate, contradictory and careless language of authoritarianism. Here the violence and horror are lulled into stupor by the glittering superficiality of Venice.

Venice is portrayed as an ideal, desired pastoral, an erotic landscape. A pair of young English holidaymakers, Mary and Colin (similar to Pinter's 1970s successful, middle-class characters), leave the disturbance and disorder of their lives in Britain and retreat into the picturesque Venice, a fantasy world. However, their romantic holiday in Venice is destroyed by the strange comfort offered by an older, married, tourist-seducer couple, into whose orbit

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 work in their room. They are lazy because of the excessive heat, and incapable of looking after one another, and they are now less tolerant of disorder in Venice:

Together they moved slowly, clumsily, effecting lugubrious compromises, attending to delicate shifts of mood, repairing breaches...they offended each other and would explore the twisting alleyways and sudden squares in silence, and with each step the city would recede as they locked tighter into each other’s presence (McEwan, 15).

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.

The film is about an obsession with gaze—following, misdirection, looking and photography—a mania which leads the *flâneur* to his fatal doom. Colin is the object viewed throughout the film. He is followed by the sound of the zoom lens. The art of photography is used as a base to create threat, and the setting (*mise en scène*) works as metaphor for “predatory” modernity:

A VIEWFINDER
COLIN’s figure framed in the viewfinder.
A zoom lens moving (4).

Objects in the film co-operate to introduce Robert. When Mary and Colin are at the glass-blowing factory in Murano, Colin “*sees through glass the distorted figure of a man in a white suit;*” the second time he looks back through the glass, “*the figure has disappeared*” (10). Pinter utilises several permutations to mirror the sinister character by using objects to reflect his main subject, who is a deluded representative of patriarchy.

Robert is an icon of a decaying patriarchy and of fascism. Through him, Pinter shows how totalitarianism erodes difference and resistance. As the three of them walk in the streets of Venice, Mary is fascinated by the feminist movement as she sees street walls filled with posters, announcements, graffiti. Robert’s opinion is predictable: “All these—are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. They are very ugly” (13). Similarly, Robert wants to know about Mary and Colin:

ROBERT Now tell me—I am a man of immense of curiosity—passionate
curiosity. Are you married, you two?
COLIN No.
ROBERT But you live together? You live together in sin?
MARY No.
ROBERT Why not? In this day and age, no one would stop you. In this day and
age, as you well know, there are no standards (14).

The words Robert uses to portray his father also describe a strong sense of authoritarianism:

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).

An equally corrupt police department gets involved in Colin's murder. In the novel it is narrated:

It had become apparent that the packed, chaotic city concealed a thriving, intricate bureaucracy, a hidden order of governmental departments with separate but overlapping functions, distinct procedures and hierarchies; unpretentious doors, in streets she passed down many times before, led not to private homes but to empty waiting-rooms with railway-station clocks, and the sound of incessant typing, and cramped offices with brown linoleum floors. She was questioned, cross-questioned,

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 liberty in Britain. More generally the setting also becomes a metaphor for the violent destiny of modern man and the fatal course of Western civilisation—the ruthless and predatory side of modernity.²³

Pinter in Prague: *The Trial*

His adaptation of Kafka’s *The Trial* gives Pinter perhaps the greatest opportunity to look realistically at another society and to revisit the main concerns of his 1980s plays and film-scripts that are explicitly about power and powerlessness. Pinter uses Kafka’s pre-1914 Prague to voice his contempt for contemporary politics, a politicised bureaucracy, a society in which the individual is defenceless and reduced in a sullen world of dogmatic values. The film’s director, David Jones, shares Pinter’s vision; he does not approve of a pure period approach: “Once I’d gone to Prague itself—Szabo, incidentally, wanted to shoot the film in Budapest—I was persuaded, since the city’s own reality is so extreme.”²⁴

Pinter’s *Trial* was filmed in Prague, Czechoslovakia—a city that welcomed Pinter’s own plays more than did his own country. Quite a number of his plays were produced in Prague, including *The Caretaker* (1965), *The Birthday Party* (1967, and 1987), and *The Homecoming* (1970). Critics in the West were emphasising a phenomenon of mystery in Pinter’s work so they tended to relate the plays to the absurd, to Freudian psychology, to myth

or to language games; in total contrast, his works were de-mystified in Prague. Their reception was closer to Pinter's expectations, in that the Czech critics did not try to label and categorise the plays as their Western counterparts did. Instead, the Czech critics wrote that they were rational, clear, and part of their daily life. The Director of the Prague Theatre Institute stated that "Pinter's theatre, as a new voice, gave strength to the theatre of the absurd as an alternative to social realism."²⁵ M. Urbankova told the Prague audiences that because everything in *The Birthday Party* was as logical and understandable as their normal life, they would find the ending even more startling and therefore all the more important.²⁶ Similarly, Joroslov Vostry wrote about the characters with familiarity:

These people like Goldberg appear so good hearted that you must be afraid of them. Their cruel behaviour and jokes have but one purpose: to destroy Stanley's will and make a Marionette of him. Clearly then Pinter shows a world where executioners can live as killers, but behave in a genial and friendly way.²⁷

When *The Homecoming* was premiered, Zdenek Horinek thought it situated Pinter halfway between Beckett's absurdism and Kafka's. But Pinter, he wrote, "is never as abstract as Beckett and the speech is closer to what is spoken daily than that of Kafka."²⁸ In Prague the plays' felicity was seen to rest in the fact that they tapped exactly the mood of Czech people. This enthusiastic reception in Prague suggested that Pinter was articulator of certain realities of the twentieth century.

Pinter's interest in Prague grew alongside his concern for Vaclav Havel in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Pinter himself, Havel, of course, was a playwright, a disciple of Beckett, a political dissident and a human rights activist. When Havel was suffering under a four-year prison sentence, Pinter organised a benefit in support of his indigent family; in Pinter's words, Havel was imprisoned "for daring to discuss individual responsibility and choice, both for the writer and the citizen."²⁹ When the BBC asked him to become involved with a radio production of two of Havel's works, Pinter wrote that his plays, "rich and precise, deal with

fear and conformity, the pressures, upon an artist, both subtle and crude, in a totalitarian society.”³⁰ But Pinter did not see Havel’s persecution as a simple demonstration of the evils of state communism in Czechoslovakia: “There are signs in this country that a not altogether dissimilar state of affairs might easily arise, if we don’t watch out.”³¹

In 1982, Beckett also became involved in the campaign to free Havel and dedicated *Catastrophe* to him. Beckett’s play is about space and watching, the two main burdens of Pinter’s political work. With *Catastrophe*, Beckett creates a play not through movement, but through non-movement; the silent and immobile protagonist stands effectively for the silenced individual in the society, under surveillance. To denounce Havel’s situation, Beckett makes visible a theatre that can no longer be spoken or enacted. In Beckett’s *Catastrophe*, even more formal and minimalist than Pinter’s *New World Order*, the muteness of the victim is taken to its logical conclusion. The piece, which is about a rehearsal in which the protagonist is reduced to an object by a director and his female assistant, uses theatricality itself as a metaphor for degradation.

Following the Velvet Revolution, Pinter was able to realise a long-held ambition, to adapt Kafka’s *The Trial* for the screen, confronting the most seminal modernist work, which had so directly influenced his early plays. Pinter’s *Trial* is faithful to Kafka’s novel because of a real affinity between Prague, Kafka and Pinter. His own plays are seen as a reflection of daily life in Prague, and the Czech critics find Pinter’s speech even closer to what is spoken daily than that of Kafka. Thus Kafka’s *Trial* and Pinter’s plays originate from the same roots. Both deal with the horrors of existence in a hostile universe with a comic and ironic tone.

Pinter mentioned that “the question of how power is used and how violence is used, how you terrorise somebody, how you subjugate somebody, has always been alive in my work.”³² His adaptation of *The Trial* returns to his early preoccupation with the depiction of menace; but whereas the early plays depicted menace in the minimal spaces of the isolated

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 from that. He resists the whole endeavour, the growing passion. But while he's resisting and in a sense dictating the terms—he's very strong and by far the most intelligent person in the story—he's nevertheless drowning in quicksand. He neither is, nor sees himself to be, a victim. He refuses to accept that role. Kafka obviously employs the whole idea of how a bureaucratic system works but he's also looking at something quite different. And that is—I have to use the term—religious identity. One of the captions I would put on *The Trial* is simply: "What kind of game is God playing?" That's what Josef K is really asking. And the only answer he gets is a pretty brutal one.³⁵

Unlike other adapters, Pinter did not treat the book as a visionary nightmare. He put the emphasis on the ordinariness and the arbitrariness of such injustices: "The nightmare of [Kafka's] world is precisely in its ordinariness. That is what is so frightening and strong."³⁶ For Pinter *The Trial* was "about something that happens on Monday, and then on Tuesday, and then on Wednesday and then right through the week."³⁷ As we have seen, the Czech theatre recognised the realism of Pinter's "fantastic" work; his *Trial* repaid the compliment.

In Pinter's *Trial*, when Josef K., a decent, senior bank clerk, is simply placed under arrest without any interrogation, the people of the city become passively involved in his situation by watching and talking about it. Josef K.'s accusation becomes the centre of all the characters' interest. Through his window K. sees the old lady at her window across the street, holding the curtain, looking into his room. The repeated image of this old woman watching K.'s room is familiar to any contemporary audience as we are all disinterested voyeurs. Prague is made into a theatre where spectators watch inactively, and the protagonist is caught in a deadlocked situation.

Josef K. takes his arrest as a joke at first but then finds himself in never-ending trials. But ultimately the case, which Josef K. does not take seriously, is "closing in on him more and more." He is "being slowly poisoned" (Pinter, 53). K. tells the inspector that he is not very surprised at his accusation because "the world is the world, one gets used to surprises, one doesn't take them seriously" (5), but he looks for ways to get out of his situation. The city is regulated by irrational laws causing the protagonist anxiety. Josef K. faces a structure of

organised chaos and corruption, which runs all the metropolitan institutions. The warders, judges, court attendants, lawyer, painter, priest—none of these is evil in any radical sense—they are owned by the Court, they are dependent on the law system for identity and being. He explains the characteristics of this institution at his first trial: “Those who arrested me were at the very best degenerate, arrogant, ignorant and corrupt. Their every action declared this. They ate my breakfast, they even tried to steal my underwear” (20). As Josef K. talks about the organisation with its “corrupt warders, stupid inspectors, totally incompetent examining magistrates” (20), a scream from the back of the court is heard as a man presses the washerwoman into a corner. Josef K. wants to throw the man and the washerwoman out of the court, after which the magistrate does not give Josef K. the chance to defend himself.

The film requires a realistic setting. From Josef K.’s lodgings to the streets and squares of the city and to the bank where he works, Pinter stresses the poverty and pollution of the city:

A street of tenements. People at windows in shirtsleeves, some holding small children. Other windows piled high with bedding. People call to each other across the street. Laughter. Fruit vendors A gramophone playing (16).

Similarly, the description of the slum district where Josef K. goes to find Titorelli the court painter, for help, shows the consequences of urban deprivation:

K stands outside a house, checking the address. There is a hole in the brickwork. A yellow steaming fluid is pouring out of this. Rats by a drain. At the bottom of the steps a small child lies howling (43).

Josef K. strongly believes that his situation will be solved by logic. It was assumed that Kafka was simply prophesying the horrors of the twentieth century. Pinter’s Josef K., like Kafka’s, is not visibly foredoomed, but a young man who believes in logic, progress and the solubility of his problems. However, K. learns that logic and reason are inefficient weapons in the decaying world he inhabits. His encounter with the priest—the prison chaplain—is the climax

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, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it” (214-15). Josef K. thinks that the door-keeper used his power to destroy the man. But the Priest reminds him that “The scripture is unalterable.” The tale is one of fundamental horror and waste. The film finishes upon Josef K.’s murder by a mysterious duo.

Pinter presents Prague as a city that is dominated by a corrupt legal system, which owns all the urban institutions. As opposed to the representation of foreign places in his other works, Czechoslovakia is not characterised as a fantasised place. Whereas *Old Times*, *No Man’s Land*, *Betrayal* and *The Comfort of Strangers* explore the British experience of an alien topography and culture, his adaptation of Kafka’s *The Trial* interprets Prague through the equally bewildering experiences of its own alienated citizen. In place of much imagination and sexual fantasy, *The Trial* works in more solid terms, as Josef K. is threatened and victimised by a brutal and hostile power system.

The Trial presents a fatal, intricate and confining city. Prague hems in Josef K. and the maze-like streets lead finally to violent death. Whether Pinter shows the European city

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 objective reality, but the "other" realities and desires refer to the injustices in Britain. His films present a pluralism in the political frame, a "global" view, and address some of the most important issues as we enter the twenty-first century, and open a dialogue between these issues and the audience. His film- scripts give an overview that supports and reflects his political concerns.

Notes

- ¹ Stanley Vincent Longman, "Fixed, Floating and Fluid Stages" in James Redmond, ed., *Themes in Drama* vol. 9: *The Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 151-60), 151.
- ² *Reunion*, dir. Jerry Schatzberg, 1989, Pinter's screenplay adapted from Fred Uhlman, *Reunion* (London: Adam Books, 1971), published in Harold Pinter, *Reunion, The Comfort of Strangers and Other Screenplays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990); *The Comfort of Strangers*, dir. Paul Schrader, 1990, Pinter's screenplay adapted from Ian McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers* (London: Picador, 1982), published in Harold Pinter, *Reunion, The Comfort of Strangers and Other Screenplays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990); *The Trial*, dir. David Jones, 1992, Pinter's screenplay adapted from Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (first published in Britain, 1935), in *The Complete Works: The Trial, America, The Castle*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Minerva, 1992), published as Harold Pinter, *The Trial* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993). Inset pagination refers to these editions.
- ³ Michael Ciment, "Expatriate" (*Film Comment* 25, 1989, 16-9), 16.
- ⁴ Ciment, "Visually Speaking: An Interview with Harold Pinter" (*Film Comment* 25, 1989, 20-22), 21.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ⁸ Francis Gillen and Anne Blake Cummings, "'The Dark is in My Mouth:' *Reunion, The Comfort of Strangers* and *Party Time*" (*Text and Presentation: Journal of the Comparative Drama Conference* 13, 1992, 25-30), 27.
- ⁹ Ciment, "Visually Speaking," 21.
- ¹⁰ Ciment, "Expatriate," 19.
- ¹¹ Ciment, "Visually Speaking," 21.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁶ Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), 137.
- ¹⁷ Ciment, "Visually Speaking," 21.
- ¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, see McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, 7.
- ¹⁹ Harlan Kennedy, "The Comfort of Strangers: Preview" (*Film Comment* 26.4, 1990, 53-56), 53.
- ²⁰ Margaret Walters, "The Comfort of Strangers" (*Listener* 124, November 1990), 40.
- ²¹ Paul Schrader, "Making it with Harold" (*Monthly Film Bulletin* 58, January 1991), 6.
- ²² *The Pinter Archive*, The British Library, Box 10 (*The Comfort of Strangers*).
- ²³ Gillen and Cummings, 29.
- ²⁴ *The Pinter Archive*, Box 10.
- ²⁵ Similarly, Harlan Kennedy points out that "Instability is the film's theme and keynote. And in Venice the metaphor for instability goes deeper even than the streets made of water. Built on centuries-old wooden piles, the city sits on strata of decaying history as if Venice were a rotten emblem for European culture itself" (*Film Comment* 26.4, 1990), 55.
- ²⁶ Michael Billington, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 350.
- ²⁷ "Pinter in Prague," *The Pinter Archive*, 110 - Box 69: Miscellaneous, Critiques, Comments, etc., 4.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ³¹ From a hand-written letter by Pinter, *The Pinter Archive*, 110 - Box 61.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Gussow, *Conversations*, December 1988, 73.
- ³⁵ Gussow, *Conversations*, September 1993, 136.
- ³⁶ Billington, 349.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Gussow, *Conversations*, October 1989, 88.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*

