

Contrasting the Aesthetic with the Orientalist: A Comparative Study of Bowles and Bertolluci's *The Sheltering Sky/Skies*

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Abstract

The paper is a comparative study of Paul Bowles' novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1977) and Bernardo Bertolucci's film adaptation of the novel in his work *The Sheltering Sky* (1990). The aim is to contrast the aesthetic and the orientalist. Thus, there is an attempt to introduce an aesthetic reading into the novel and an orientalist viewing of the film so as to compare and contrast both texts using a textual analysis approach. Throughout the paper, in addition to detecting the film's deviation from the novel, Bertolucci's orientalist project is revealed while Bowles novel is aesthetically tested. The last part of the paper calls for questioning the degree of deviance occurring in the film and reconsidering the aesthetic implications of the novel.

Keywords: *Aesthetic, Contrast, Film, Orientalist.*

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Bringing Paul Bowles' novel and Bernardo Bertolluci's film *the Sheltering Sky into* a comparative dialogue aims at contrasting the orientalist with the aesthetic through gauging the aesthetic depth of the novel and the orientalist breadth of the film. The first step in this comparative study would disclose Bertolluci's failure in detecting the discursive clichés employed in the film in a sharp contrast to the novel. The second step would introduce a potential aesthetic reading of the novel itself in an attempt to measure the deviation occurring in the film through imposing notions imbued with the zest for aggrandizing nuances.

To illuminate the Orientalist implications residing in Bertolluci's *The Sheltering Sky*, it would be essential to bring into light the four main elements through which the orientalist discourse is crystallized. The first element is estrangement or the notion of the "Uncanny" (Freud, 1919, p.2). For Bertolluci to present an image of the orient, he has to follow a mode of the grotesque that would serve the viewer's expectations of an oriental environment by turning the familiar into what is sinister, strange and exotic. The second element is that of utilizing the Sahara as a backcloth setting that reduces and curtails the function of space to a technical one. There is no denying that the analogy between the sterility of the couple and that of the desert is a significant one. However, this single scene where Port and Kit desperately try to have a sexual intercourse, but fail, does not weigh much in front of the explicitly predominant features of mummified discourse about the Oriental Other being brought back after the 9/11. It is evident throughout the movie that space is not given an essential role as it is in the novel. The third element to be added to the list is the emphasis on sexuality and the magnified sensuality employed by Bertolluci in an attempt to make the film appeal to the senses rather than to the intellect. For example, the encounter between Maghnia and Port in the novel does not revolve around sexual activity and there are no details of sexual intercourse while in the movie it is transformed to a pornographic scene devoid of signification. In one of his interviews, Bertolluci claims that the movie is a representation of what he calls "physiology of feelings" (Bertolluci and Gerard, 1990, p.1) which refers to the use of the landscape to externalize states of feelings. Nevertheless, his claim turns into a set of orientalist clichés that cannot go beyond Hollywood-consumed prescriptions. The list of deviations could be extended indefinitely, but it is enough to limit it to the salient ones.

Insofar as the novel is concerned, the series of encounters and clashes with the North Africans Port and Kit are subjected to lead them forcibly to experience difference. Encountering the Sahara and its elements also transforms their psyches and shapes them in a different way. Their quests carry them toward the mysteries of their own fate where they emerge, not as Americans or even as rich people having their safari in North Africa, but rather as beings who are having [A journey into the innermost part of the Sahara during which their authentic personalities are gradually revealed.] (Hernandez, 1997, p.260) Their trip farther and deeper into the Sahara leads them toward their devastation and ruin. The changes in the characters are represented gradually through the first and second books of the novel. The emotional turmoil of the characters grows in depth and significance until it reaches a crescendo in the final moment that is expressed in the epigraph of the third book: "From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached." (*The Sheltering Sky*: 209). Kafka's statement underlines the end of the questers' Odyssey. Toying with the characters, Bowles skillfully stage-manages their fears, deliriums, hallucinations and motives:

Resolutely she turned her mind away, refusing to examine it, bending all her efforts to putting a sure barrier between herself and it. Like an insect spinning its cocoon thicker and more resistant, her mind would go on strengthening the thin partition, the danger spot of her being. (SS: 209).

The characters' encounters set up a watershed between their earlier and future lives. Port and Kit suffer a painful transition into a new dimension of self-knowledge. In a place where "civilization" leaves off and "wilderness" dominates, they find themselves in the middle of a process of change. "The encounter remains on a metaphorical level, where the hostile African geography and its "hideous moors" function as means to exteriorize the disenchanted Westerner's internal geography." (El-ghandour,92). In the first book of the novel, Port confidently says:

I don't have to justify my existence by any such primitive means. The fact that I breathe is my Justification. If humanity does not consider that a justification, it can do what it likes to me. I am not going to carry a passport to existence around with me, to prove I have the right to be here! I'm here! I'm in the world! But my world's not humanity's world. It's the world as I see it. (SS: 71-72).

It is obvious that his understanding of existence is wrapped into a somewhat cosmopolitan way of thinking. His statement is a reflection of a seemingly stable self-contained person, but it will automatically change into a desperate one when he says: "How, ever since I discovered that my passport was gone, I've felt only half alive. But It's a very depressing thing in a place like this to have no proof of who you are..." (SS.p.122) This may seem a contradiction, but, in its very essence, it is an unconscious dramatic change.

Kit also experiences her own share of vehement transition when she starts her real journey into the Sahara with her numbness. She gets detached from whatever may remind her of civilization and its residuals. In the second book of the novel, Kit addresses Port as she complains about being fed up with the primitiveness of the place:

I haven't seen them (her bags) in a longtime. Ever since the boat I've been living in one bag. I'm so sick of it. And when I looked out that window after lunch...I felt I'd simply die if I didn't see something civilized soon. Not only that. I'm having a Scotch sent up and I'm opening my last pack of Players. (S.S:123).

Later in the third book, she loses herself in the "primitiveness" she used to criticize. Her experience with the Tuareg turns her into a machine of stimulus and response that has no roots in the reality around her. The very first moment of the transition process in Kit's case is when she leaves the body of Port behind. This moment stands for a rebirth and a metamorphosis through which she throws herself into the abyss of forgetting the past including her dead husband. She becomes a slave of her own instincts and illusions that seize the control of her actions and reactions. She is no longer the same character of the first and the second books, the one who clings to her cosmetic products:

For a long time she stared at the other articles: small white handkerchiefs, shiny nail scissors, a pair of tan silk pajamas, little jars of facial cream. Then she handled them absently; they were like the fascinating and mysterious objects left by a vanished civilization. She felt that each one was a symbol of something forgotten. It did not even sadden her when she knew she could not remember what the things meant. (SS: 229).

The impact produced by encounters is not limited to the demolition of the civilized ego, but it extends to the inner being of the characters:

The western pilgrim abroad confronts a violent destiny in which he becomes the prey of the primitive forces which his odyssey arouses. These forces may be external, embodied in alien peoples and hostile landscapes, or internal, aroused from the repressed areas of his own psyche. (Pounds,1986, p.424).

The journey turns inward and becomes introspective. The questing being suffers consciously. The hunger for pain and agony comes out from Bowles's longing for death and obliteration: "I can see that a lot of my stories were definitely therapeutic.....I need to clarify an issue for myself, and the only way of doing it was to create a fake psychodrama in which I could be everybody." (Bowles, Evans,1971, p10) The Sahara becomes an extension of the psyche that thrashes about its destiny and fate in the middle of a tempest that demolishes every single piece of the quester's spirit. The search for fulfillment swings to nihilism and a vacuum of non-existence. For Port destiny is death, for Kit it is madness and failure to find a refuge in the grotesque. While Port lies dying, he finds himself in a space of liminality and in-betweenness. His final moments in the novel take the form of forays that oscillate back and forth between death and life. The whole tragedy is pictured in Port's own words:

Death is always on the way, but the fact that you don't know when it will arrive seems to take away from the finiteness of life. It's that terrible precision that we hate so much. But because we don't know, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless. (SS: 186).

This unfolding drama of Port's existential self-interrogation is striking evidence that Port's quest reveals his inner perception of the meaning of life. In the hunt for an attainable theriac, Port keeps searching forbidden areas. These places may not essentially be geographical or concrete. He loses himself into the trajectories of the anonymous and the mysterious.

Port's death is not to be compared with that of Kit. Her loss of identity, her dissolving spirit, her disintegration and fall into the void of timelessness are worthy of note. Kit's predicament is intensified by Bowles's injection of sadism, violence and madness in the narrative. The act of leaving her husband's corpse is the first step toward psychosis. Her surrender to the landscape

makes her weaker than she ever has been. The fact that Kit is found at the end of the novel is but another door opened toward the question of whether she is reintegrating or still haunted by her doom:

Resolutely she turned her mind away, refusing to examine it, bending all her efforts to putting a sure barrier between herself and it. Like an insect spinning its cocoon thicker and more resistant, her mind would go on strengthening the thin partition, the danger spot of her being. (SS: 209).

As soon as she manages to escape alive from Belquassim's house, she regains partly her consciousness, but she resists the idea of being sent back to New York. Her resistance ought to be explained in the sense that she becomes a part of the Sahara, and that is "The end of the line." (S.S: 251).

After tracing the trajectory of the New Yorkers in the North African Sahara and displaying Bertolucci's orientalist project, there is an imperative to draw an analogy between both works. It would be an undoubted exaggeration to state hurried generalizations about a deviance of the film. It may appear that the director's highlighting of certain details over others has one goal which is that of serving the film industry, but it surely functions to serve a major discourse. It is also of paramount importance to introduce an interrogative insight into the reading given above. Foraying toward the conclusion that the novel entirely lends itself to aesthetic exegesis is a bit hasty. In addition to the aesthetic elements mentioned above, there lurks a set of orientalist nuances that are to be revealed through a deeper insight.

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