

The Invisibility of Human Suffering: The Adaptation of Novelised Biographical Material in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* and Brian Gilbert's *Not without my Daughter*

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Abstract:

Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* (1993) and Brian Gilbert's *Not without my Daughter* (1991) are based on novels which are in their turn based on real life events. While Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) is a respected literary text that deals with the ambiguities of vice and virtue within Nazism, Le Ly Hayslip's novelised autobiography (two volumes, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993)) and Betty Mahmoody's work (1989) are popular texts aimed at transmitting the experience of two women living respectively in Vietnam and Iran in the most conflictive periods of the recent history of these countries. The three films have their political content in common but, since their artistic qualities are diverse, the general public's interest in the political and historical conflicts they respectively depict has been aroused in different measure. It is my aim to analyze the boundaries between personal tragedy and political propaganda in these texts and also to discuss whether a critical judgement in artistic terms is the appropriate strategy to read these screen adaptations.

1. Introduction

The personal and the political blend in a single historical continuum in three recent films which are adaptations of novels based on real life events: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* (1993) and Brian Gilbert's *Not without my Daughter* (1991). These three films are second-hand elaborations by the screen writer and the director of biographical and autobiographical material that had already passed through the filter of the writing produced by the original eyewitness and the writer-collaborator. Although in many respects these three films are widely divergent, they have a common intention: to transmit to a large cinema audience, which had been only partly informed by the books used as original sources, the authentic experiences of people victimised in political conflicts essential to an understanding of the twentieth century. By virtue of the publicity usually given to films and despite the different fortunes of their screen adaptations, the real life experiences of Oskar Schindler, Le Ly Hayslip and Betty Mahmoody have interested a wide audience whose vision of contemporary history is basically framed by the media and by fiction, but less frequently by the scholarly work of historians.

The autobiography of Le Ly Hayslip—two volumes: *When Heaven and Earth*

Changed Places (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993)—and the autobiographical account of Betty Mahmoody's ordeal in Khomeini's Iran—*Not without my Daughter* (1989)—differ considerably from Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982). The former are autobiographies without literary pretensions, actually written by writer-collaborators whose contribution is limited to articulating the memories of the original eyewitnesses. Keneally's text is, in contrast, a novel of undeniable literary quality (it received the Booker Prize in 1982), in which the choral autobiographical voices of the *Schindlerjuden* and their saviour, Oskar Schindler, are constantly screened by the incisive, ironical voice of the narrator, always preoccupied by the risk of assuming uncritically the point of view of the eyewitnesses. The screen adaptation of *Schindler's Ark* is one of those rare instances in which the high quality of the novel inspires a distinguished film which fundamentally respects its original source. This was acknowledged in the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay awarded to Steven Zilian, one of the seven the film reaped in the 1993 edition. The screen adaptations of Hayslip and Mahmoody's novelised autobiographical accounts did not find such a warm critical reception, attracting smaller audiences and less media attention for the topics they broached, even though these are as important as the Jewish Holocaust to understand the dynamics of history in the twentieth century.

Many reviewers found a direct correlation in each of these three adaptations between the artistic quality of the director's work, the credibility of the events seen on screen and the importance of the historico-political subject. While Spielberg's film was regarded as a faithful portrait of Jewish suffering in World War II—because it was a 'good' film that avoided melodrama—the other two films were disparaged by most critics worldwide: artistically, they were regarded as simply 'bad' melodrama, a judgement that led to questioning the truthfulness and the right of the victimised eyewitnesses to offer their own personal point of view. By the same debatable (but hardly ever questioned) critical rule of thumb, the real life events experienced by Hayslip and Mahmoody were not given the same value in historical terms as those of the *Schindlerjuden*, even though the experiences of these two women offered new insights on still unsolved political situations while Spielberg's film added little to an already well-known episode of recent history.

It is my aim to analyse how critical judgements on the artistic quality of films and novels based on autobiographical events taking place in conflictive historical backgrounds often interfere with the appreciation of sheer human suffering. If the main purpose of adaptations, such as the three I am surveying, is to elicit the sympathy of film audiences for the victims of recent history, it seems ethically untenable to judge them mainly on the basis of their artistic merits, relegating to a secondary position the empathy they show for human suffering. The attitude before such types of two-layered adaptations must ideally stop short of critical intentions and go, simultaneously, beyond criticism, so that a clear-sighted critical perception of quality (and of ideological intention) does not obscure the need to find a new artistic language capable of transmitting the reality of human suffering and a new critical language capable of adequately judging it.

2. Oskar and Oscar: Steven Spielberg's Search for Artistic Respect in *Schindler's List* (1993)

John Ellis's dictum, "the faithfulness of the adaptation is the degree to which it can rework and replace a memory of the original source" (1982, 4), needs profound rethinking in the case of Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*. The success of Spielberg's film, which can be regarded as a remarkably faithful adaptation, has revealed to what extent literature fails to penetrate the historical consciousness of post-modernity. Even though Keneally's book is the Booker Prize winner that has sold best, its impact was minor compared to that of its screen adaptation, which has superseded if not the cultural memory of the book (on the contrary, it has helped it to sell even better), at least the original title, *Schindler's Ark*. More than one reviewer must have noted with puzzlement that although Keneally's novel had been around for eleven years by the time Spielberg's film was released, the legend of Oskar Schindler's altruistic rescue of 1,100 Jews from the Nazis had failed to attract the attention of the media or the readers. Studios spend huge amounts of money on advertising their films, amounts that are absolutely out of the reach of any publishing house and that necessarily define the difference between the success of a book and that of its film version. This may explain why, despite having been blessed with the indisputable literary talent of Thomas Keneally, the story of Oskar Schindler was not seen to be an important moral example for all until Spielberg directed the film. Yet, it is important to note that had a less gifted director dealt with the same subject, or had Spielberg's film flopped, Schindler's magnanimous act would have certainly attracted less praise, remaining an anecdote rather than the moral parable that it appears to be now.

One of the obvious questions that *Schindler's List* brings to mind is why this story has not been told by a German. In fact, only the zeal and persistence of Leopold Pfefferberg—one of the names in Schindler's list—caused the Australian writer Thomas Keneally to become interested in the life of Oskar Schindler. Keneally, a resident in the USA, came across the legend of the German saviour of Jews when he entered by chance Pfefferberg's leather goods shop in Beverly Hills. In that accidental encounter, Pfefferberg's often repeated tale found an outlet through which the wide audience he had promised Schindler could be reached, though it took another ten years for the legend to hit the screen. Spielberg bought the rights on the novel in 1982, as soon as it was published, but still a young director then, and fresh from the success of *E.T.*, he deemed it necessary to let a prudential number of years pass before he was prepared to handle such a delicate subject as the Holocaust. The reasons why *Schindler's List* was made precisely in 1993 were, according to Spielberg himself, his rediscovery of his own Jewish roots—prompted by the conversion of his wife, Kate Capshaw, to Judaism (Eram 1993, 52)—and his having achieved a privileged position in which, for the first time, he could use a limited budget to make a purely personal film and risk its failure. Despite the many Jews placed in important positions in the Hollywood industry, Spielberg was told at the time by an anonymous executive that he had better give the \$29 million budget to the Museum of the Holocaust in Jerusalem if all he sought was easing his Jewish conscience,

for the Holocaust, Hollywood's voice proclaimed, was box-office poison.

The International Jewish Council also distrusted Spielberg's personal involvement in the Jewish question, so that, at their instigation, Spielberg was banned from filming in Auschwitz (Redacción y agencias 1993, 56; Reuter 1993, 57). The king of special effects seemed too young, too Hollywood, too politically naive to give screen credibility to the horror of the Jewish Holocaust. The Polish press (the film was made in Poland) was not less suspicious of Spielberg's intentions, especially after hundreds of notices looking for dark-haired, dark-eyed, semitic-looking extras for the film covered Warsaw overnight. The strategy of Spielberg's casting team, despite being habitual in Hollywood, brought back to Poland unpleasant overtones of Nazi racism that added little to Spielberg's popularity among Jews. The most persistent fear, however, was that Spielberg would make an excessive use of melodrama since he has a (decidedly questionable) reputation for making sentimental films—a point which has proved crucial in the warm critical reception of *Schindler's List*. Yet, while the debate about Spielberg's authority was raging among his Jewish detractors and defenders, the critics welcomed the film as Spielberg's most serious attempt at earning the artistic respect of the Hollywood academy. Oskar Schindler finally won Spielberg the cherished Oscar as Best Film Director, after his two previous adaptations of literary fiction—*Empire of the Sun* (1987), based on J. G. Ballard's novel, and *The Color Purple* (1985), based on Alice Walker's—had failed to do so.

The cynicism of this argument may not be evident at first sight but it is the most powerful undercurrent in the excellent critical reception of the film. It implies that Spielberg made *Schindler's List* primarily because he wanted an Oscar and not for more profound personal reasons. What is even more worrying is that it also implies that some subjects may give rise to masterpieces while others may not. *Schindler's List* was, therefore, proclaimed Spielberg's masterpiece not because it is superior to any film he has made but mainly because of its subject—and also because it is his only film made without big business in mind. At the time when *The Color Purple* failed to win a single Oscar despite its ten nominations, some critics questioned the authority of the conservative Hollywood academy as it would not grant awards to this film about Afro-American people, even though its director was white. This 'mistake' is what Spielberg finally 'corrected' when *Schindler's List* won seven Oscars and received five other nominations in 1993—in the same edition in which Spielberg's own *Jurassic Park* was awarded three Oscars for technical merits. Ironically, many critics missed the point of Spielberg's success by insisting on the rather far-fetched idea that Spielberg had made the (allegedly) far inferior *Jurassic Park* (also an adaptation, based on Michael Crichton's best-seller) in order to finance *Schindler's List*. Few, if any, praised Spielberg for the amazing feat of having made two such excellent films in the same year. The great quality of *Jurassic Park*, beyond its obvious technical accomplishments, and the consistency of Spielberg's career, built around the idea of the monster in all its manifestations beyond the artificial barriers of film genre, is, no doubt, a matter that deserves further consideration.

Anne Thwaite once remarked that "one of the pleasures of writing biography is

that one doesn't have to choose, in any sense, between life and literature. One can have them both" (1988, 17). Keneally's novel may be read from this perspective, as it is a portrait of Schindler's life as a moral mystery written in the best tradition of Literature's exploration of good and evil. Keneally observes in the "Author's Note" that he chose to render Schindler's acts in a novel not only because the craft of the novelist was the only one he could lay claim to, but also because the novel's techniques seemed "suited for a character of such ambiguity and magnitude as Oskar". He adds that he "attempted to avoid all fiction, though, since fiction would debase the record", drawing in this way a sharp dividing line between "reality and the myths which are likely to attach themselves to a man of Oskar's stature" (1993, 14). Keneally's denial of the use of 'fiction' in his novel seems disingenuous for, being a novel, his book must contain necessarily a measure of fiction. Up to a point, Keneally's work is comparable to that of Truman Capote for *In Cold Blood*, a piece of 'non-fiction fiction' in which the report and the literary study of morality mix in equal parts. In an interview with Martin Amis, Capote himself stated that "non-fiction fiction is, or can be, at least as 'imaginative' as the non non-fiction fiction: i.e. the novel", although Amis objected that the moral imagination was necessarily missing in this type of fiction as "the facts cannot be arranged to give them moral point" (Amis 1986, 39).

Precisely, the point that interested Keneally and that to a large extent also attracted Spielberg was the impossibility of seeing Schindler's odyssey in the easy black and white morality inspired in Manichaean fiction. In the "Prologue" to his novel, Keneally writes that "fatal human malice is the staple of narrators, original sin the mother-fluid of historians. But it is a risky enterprise to write of virtue" (1993, 15). While Keneally solved this dilemma by means of irony and an insidious questioning of Oskar's virtue—done mainly through stressing his similarities with Amon Goeth, the sadistic Nazi commander of the Plaszow camp—Spielberg proposed a suggestive blend of moments of intense pathos and moments of brutal violence. Finding the adequate tone that would give credibility to the figure of this German hero without letting an excess of sentimentalism blur the sharp edges of the hardly angelic real life Oskar Schindler was the problem that Keneally and Spielberg faced and successfully solved. The suspicion of cold-blooded cynicism in Oskar's actions in *Schindler's List*—this is, after all, the man who sold for drinks the ring that his Jews made from the gold of their teeth to thank him—is part of the contemporary rejection of sentimental exemplarity in the portrait of real life people. "Ours", as Homberger and Charmely write, "is a century distrustful of exemplary lives in the heroic sense" (1988, 11)—Schindler's confirms that distrust.

The strategy chosen by screen writer Stephen Zilian, a specialist in adapting books based on real life events for the screen, to adapt *Schindler's Ark* was regrouping the events described by Keneally's informers thematically. Zilian's adaptation is excellent indeed, although the effects of the necessary compression—despite the generous length of the film—have taken their toll on the characterization of the *Schindlerjuden*. It is interesting to note that there is a certain disparity of intentions in the film, which, on the one hand, emphasizes the individual names of the victims (the first word heard in the film

is “Name?”, to which a long list of Jewish names follows), rejecting the idea that the victims were a mass and, on the other hand, fails to individualize the characters with a cast of little-known actors, given roles too short to impress the audience with a sense of identity. Apart from this, the film gives undue prominence to the figure of Itzhak Stern, especially in the scene in which Schindler retrieves him from the train bound for Auschwitz, a scene in which the real Stern was not involved and that Keneally used for a very different purpose, that of stressing Oskar’s indifference to the actual names of those he put in his list.

The mode chosen by Spielberg to narrate his film, melodramatic epic shot in black and white in the style of documentaries, was meant to elicit tears from audiences and to impress them at the same time with a sense of historical credibility. It is indeed ironic that the ‘reality’ of Goeth’s random shootings, the furnaces of Auschwitz and the massacre of the Cracow ghetto could be impressed best on the minds of audiences by sparing them the real colours of historical horror: the film would have been perhaps unwatchable in colour mainly because of the dramatic realism of the shootings, which would have made it too lurid. Spielberg symbolically indicated the impossibility of using colour in the motif of the little girl with the red coat—a motif taken from the novel—whom Schindler sees as a witness of the horror of the eviction of the ghetto and later as a dead body. This motif was criticized, together with the emotive final scene in which the real *Schindlerjuden* are seen parading before Schindler’s tomb in Jerusalem with the actors who play them in the film, as an unpardonable lapse into characteristic Spielberg sentimentalism. In fact, what these negative critiques indicate is that audiences and critics do not actually want to see reality—in all its colours—but a stylish version of it. The last scene must be necessarily sentimental for it contains the true homage of the film to the victims, making them visible, real, genuine, as the authorities behind Spielberg’s camera. That this was regarded as a sentimentalist strategy indicates how unwatchable reality has become and how difficult it is for post-modern audiences to face the real yet invisible victims of history.

The worldwide release of *Schindler’s List* offered food for thought in more than one sense. A series of opening nights crowned by the presence of VIPs started with a private projection for President Clinton and continued in Europe, after the world release of the film in Jerusalem. The film was praised by the International Jewish Council as much as by the German media, and the idea that the film had educational value and that it should be seen, as a duty towards victims of discrimination in general, was quickly preached around the world. A few dissenting voices could be heard coming from Emilie Schindler (Oskar’s estranged wife), the Islamic countries that banned or censored the film, and critics who, like German Will Tremper, were angered: “Seldom has a film upset me so much, brought me to the verge of tears and made me so angry”, he wrote (Jackson 1994, 62). Tremper’s refusal to cry points at the main problem reviewers had to face when writing about the film, for there is currently no critical vocabulary adequate to praise melodrama and sentimentalism. It was obvious that the tears elicited by the film, which were apparently copious in all countries where it opened, did not interfere with the

enjoyment of the film as a masterpiece: they were, indeed, tears made legitimate by the approval of the reviewers.

The commercial and critical success of the film and the attention attracted by the moral parable seen in Schindler's good deed should not obscure, though, the background against which the film may be read. To begin with, the popularity of Spielberg ensured an audience for *Schindler's List* that would have been very different had Oliver Stone or Brian Gilbert been the director. Yet the film's fiercest competitor in the box office was *Mrs. Doubtfire*, a comedy starring Sally Field (the protagonist of *Not without my Daughter*), which after ten weeks had grossed 20% more benefits than *Schindler's List* (Redacción 1994, 3). On the other hand, while the Germans were wondering why an Australian novelist had used Schindler's life to explain the position of many heroic Germans during World War II while no German writer had done so, few were questioning the privileged position of Jews to give their version of events. The Holocaust of, for instance, the gypsies massacred by Hitler still has to find a spokesman and money to pay for a masterpiece, while the Jews are fortunate to have both in the person of the no less privileged Spielberg. Six months after the release of the film a controversy arose in *The New York Times Literary Review* as to the moral right of the USA to criticize Nazism in view, as Harold Pinter among others argued, of the harmful foreign policy carried out by the State Department, resulting in disasters such as the Vietnam war (Marti 1994). Yet, what all were silencing was why Amon Goeth and not Radoman Karadzic was the villain in the film hit of 1993, at a time when a new version of the Nazi genocide was happening in ex-Yugoslavia. The lesson that should be derived from the Spielberg-Zilian adaptation of Keneally's *Schindler's List* is that post-modern cinema audiences refuse to see historical 'reality' and its victims unless they are packaged as 'art'. The courage employed by Spielberg to visualize the nightmare that involved all the victims fifty years ago is no doubt commendable, but his film also discloses a silence about the difficulties of representing the victims of our time. Spielberg's film answers the question of how we can make art of such immense suffering with a proper artistic language that avoids the pitfalls of bad melodrama and of morbid documentary. It also suggests that this valuable artistic language should not lessen the impact on audiences of the only too real human drama being told. Audiences that are constantly told that the visibility of human suffering is acceptable only in good art may miss important moral reflections about the suffering caused by the barbarian politics of the twentieth century depicted in films patronised as bad melodrama. *Schindler's List* avoids this risk but seems too centred on its own artistic merits to be totally effective as a moral reflection on the horror of the Holocaust.

3. A Film Too Many: *Heaven and Earth* (1993) as Oliver Stone's Vietnamese *Gone with the Wind*.

Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* opened at the same time as *Schindler's List*, to far less critical acclaim and commercial success. Stone's third return to Vietnam—the closing chapter of an accidental trilogy—was received by many with disinterest, for it was generally believed that Stone had already exhausted the subject. Unfortunately, this

attitude obscured how very different *Heaven and Earth* is from any other American film on Vietnam, since it is the first to be narrated from the point of view of the 'enemy', represented by Le Ly, a Vietnamese woman who moved away from the hell of her native Vietnam to the USA when she became an American citizen by marriage. The use of autobiographical material is no novelty in Stone's films about Vietnam. The Oscar award winner as Best Film of 1986, *Platoon*, had been based on Stone's own memories of the war, while Stone's second film in the trilogy, the poignant *Born on the 4th of July* (1989), was based on the autobiography of Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic. However, Stone was prompted to buy the rights of Le Ly Hayslip's autobiography by his interest in presenting not only the version of the 'enemy' but also of a woman. Stone's first film with a female protagonist—dedicated to his mother—is a film about women's role as victims of men and of the war caused by men, a topic hardly ever taken up by (male) film-makers. Up to a point, Vietnam is symbolically seen by Stone as a woman with a much greater capacity to heal the wounds of war and to learn to forgive than the masculine, callous, militaristic USA. This position has, of course, its setbacks, for Hayslip cannot be made into a symbol for all of Vietnam without risking a falsification of her own experience or the stereotyping of the historical background. Stone's film, albeit not his worthiest, is worth seeing.

Le Ly Hayslip may have appeared to many as an odd choice in this pioneering approximation to the enemy's voice. Her autobiography, written mainly to publicise the foundation East Meets West, which she established in 1987 to help build schools and hospitals in Vietnam, begins with Hayslip's explicitly exculpating her American audience: "I will try to tell you who your enemy was and why almost everyone in the country you tried to help resented, feared and misunderstood you. It was not your fault" (Hayslip with Wurts 1994, 16). In her view, Vietnam was trapped in the sinister logic of war long before the US troops came, fighting a war of independence misread by the USA as a war against Communism. Both sides, she adds, did their duty in the conflict while fate determined the terrible clash between the invaders and the invaded. Hayslip's readiness to understand and forgive may not be representative of all Vietnamese—may even be suspect of insincerity to the suspicious-minded—but her attitude is possibly the only one that America is prepared to accept for the time being. A nation still trying to understand the suffering of the Vietnam veteran may not be ready to hear the Vietnamese veterans' version of events. More critical voices must come after Hayslip's, but hers is the first to have been heard and there lies its importance.

"Autobiography", G. Thomas Couser writes, "is the literary form, and democracy the political form, most congruent with the idea of a unique and autonomous self" (1989, 13). To a certain extent, Hayslip's adoption of her new American citizenship was reinforced by her adoption of the American autobiographical tradition, although this exploration of her self was not devoid of a critical look at America, coming from an immigrant trying to make sense of the cultural split in her life. Interestingly, most critics agreed in assessing as the best section in the film that of Le Ly's arrival in the USA and her bewildered look at the consumerist America of the 1970s. Certainly, her most incisive tone in the book is achieved in the episodes narrating her clash with American culture,

which Stone reciprocates with an ironic perspective on Buddhism, Hayslip's religion. In this sense, it is interesting to compare Betty Mahmoody's failure to understand her husband's need to remain in touch with his Iranian native culture to Hayslip's hypercritical, clear-sighted blend of Vietnam's spiritualism and America's materialism in her own self. Her description of her American life demolishes the image of the immigrant enchanted by the new life in America and exposes the USA from a less idealised perspective.

The collaboration between Stone and Hayslip in *Heaven and Earth* can be taken as an instance of the kind of bicultural collaboration in autobiographies that is "particularly problematic because [it is] produced on, or across, a cultural frontier by means of 'collusion' or 'negotiation'" (Couser 1988, 120). The negotiation included in this case Hayslip's acceptance of Stone's manipulation of the events in her life, which was inevitable given the limited length of the film in comparison to the autobiography. Hayslip was wary of accepting Stone's collaboration because of her fears as to how he would handle the sex scenes in the film—especially the scene of her rape (Klapwald 1993, 22)—and because she feared he would impose an inflexible American point of view on her own. Yet, she writes about Stone that:

Like so many veterans I had worked with, he still held in a lot of anger about the war. But he had also the god-given soul of an artist, which allowed him to appreciate his feelings and transform them into compelling, and ultimately healing, images on film. I saw in Oliver a kindred spirit who could help my story touch a much bigger world audience that only movies can reach. (Hayslip with Hayslip 1994, 353)

Le Ly Hayslip played a very active role in the adaptation, first through the abundant correspondence that she addressed to Stone and later as a consultant in the film. According to Stone himself, Le Ly's help was invaluable in the reconstruction in Thailand of her native village and in the way in which peasant life is shown on screen; apparently, this went as far as her actual on-screen presence in the background in some scenes. Her obsession (similar to Pfefferberg's) with reaching a world audience led her to accept, despite initial disagreements, Stone's reduction of the several American men in her life to the single figure of sergeant Steve Butler, played with great panache by Tommy Lee Jones. Stone justified the melding of the different men into Butler on the grounds that Hayslip had always gone for the same kind of men, but Butler becomes in the film a symbol for all the American men who did their 'duty' in Vietnam—including the dirty job Butler does—and who are finally destroyed by the weight of the past, despite the readiness to love and forgive of a Vietnam symbolized by Le Ly. It is interesting to note that Tommy Lee Jones's performance as Butler was the only point of the film unanimously praised and that he was prevented from receiving an Oscar nomination for it because he had been nominated for his role in *The Fugitive*. This proves, again, that notions of artistic merit affected the reception of Stone's film, for Butler's figure—despite

its human dimension—is actually the most blatant and questionable manipulation of Hayslip's story by Stone.

Le Ly's difficulties in mastering the English language led her to seek the help of a journalist and Vietnam veteran, Jay Wurst, for the first volume of her autobiography. Albert E. Stone writes that after the early example of the autobiography of the native American Black Elk written by John G. Neihardt and the more recent work of Alex Hailey with Malcom X, "collaborative autobiography has become an accepted mode in the modern era for recreating one's partner's convincing image" (1991, 103). Yet Hayslip's text is unusual within this field and within that of immigrant autobiography to which it belongs formally. The second volume, which deals with her life in the USA and her version of the American dream, was written in collaboration with her own son, James, himself a Vietnamese immigrant to the USA. The implicit biography of the son is thus inscribed in the text of the mother, finding a parallel in the biography of newcomer Hiep Thi Li, the actress who plays Le Ly. The life of Hiep Thi Li, one of the 'boat people' who left Vietnam after the takeover of the Communists, is indeed similar to that of James Hayslip: both left Vietnam as children, acquired American citizenship, graduated from a Californian university and found their fifteen minutes of fame thanks to their collaboration in the telling of Le Ly's life. Their own stories of integration within the USA are, thus, still to be told—the subject for a new generation—but are implicit in the adaptation at a subtextual level. The casting also included Cambodian Haing S. Ngor (in the role of Le Ly's father), himself a newcomer discovered in Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields* (1984), a film about the Khmer's bloody regime in Kampuchea based on the real life events narrated by journalist Sydney Shanberg. The presence of Ngor, who was awarded an Oscar for his role in that film, adds no doubt an important intertextual dimension to *Heaven and Earth*. On the other hand, since Stone's application for a permit to make the film in Vietnam was turned down on the grounds that the scene of Le Ly's rape by two Vietcong soldiers was inadmissible, this ironically allowed a large number of Vietnamese refugees living in Thailand to collaborate in the film as extras—the victims once more made present on the screen as the silent authorities in the background.

Heaven and Earth is, to a certain extent, a woman's film, though the label can be used to read the film in two directions. A number of critics pointed to the similarities between Stone's epic melodrama and those of the 1940s, in which actresses such as Joan Crawford or Betty Davis starred, in a derogatory sense: according to them the plot seems, in both cases, contrived and incredible. This type of critical judgement discloses, in fact, the reviewers' inability to show empathy towards Le Ly's real life odyssey (and that of others like her) and, incidentally, the low esteem in which cinema targeted at female audiences and with female protagonists is still held. Stone herself had spoken of the film as a Vietnamese *Gone with the Wind* (Piquer 1993, 34) with a genuine interest in the values of melodrama to transmit to a large audience the drama of women in war, although it is also easy to see in this choice Stone's unwillingness to consider a more up-to-date, feminist position. Thus, although the film reflects Hayslip's brutal rape by two Vietcong men, the tone of passages such as the following is indeed softened by Stone, perhaps

because it puts American men in the same category as Vietnamese men:

All the American men I had known—in Vietnam or America—become narrow-minded, petty and vindictive when they are angry. They didn't know about women and didn't respect them. I couldn't believe such men had ever known a mother's love: the love of a woman who brought them into this world. Such atrocities as I had witnessed in both countries could only be perpetrated by men with no awareness of the sacred origins of life. (Hayslip with Hayslip 1994, 174)

Actually, Le Ly Hayslip's—and Betty Mahmoody's—autobiographical novels *are* feminist, in a sense that is better described as pragmatic feminism, a feminism coming from bitter experiences with men. The experience of women in the Vietnam war, and in any other war, has been always subordinated to that of men, even though women have taken part in war, especially as victims but also as nurses and, more recently, as soldiers. In her survey of American narratives about Vietnam produced by women, Carol Lynn Mithers notes somewhat ambiguously that “there has always been a place for women to serve in war, but there is no place for them in its mythology” (1991, 81), as if vindicating the presence of women in war were more relevant than taking a feminist stance against it. Mithers, who ascribes the little attention paid to Vietnam women veterans to widespread sexism, devotes all of her article to the vindication of the voices of the American women who were in Vietnam as an essential complement to those of the American male veterans. Yet, even though she herself notes that only eight American women died in Vietnam “while by 1968, according to the North Vietnamese government, 250,000 Vietnamese women fighters had been killed and 40,000 disabled” (1991, 81), she says nothing about the unheard voices of Vietnamese women and does not even mention Hayslip's autobiography, whose first volume had been published in 1989, two years prior to the publication of Mithers's article. Hayslip herself notes how unfairly unbalanced the power to tell the story of the victims has been and still is, and how little attention Americans have paid to the actual magnitude of the human catastrophe:

... more than 58,000 American dead versus 1.9 million Vietnamese—almost 33 Vietnamese deaths for each American killed—surely one of history's costliest victories. While American politicians and distraught families aggravate old wounds over the relative handful of remaining American MIAs, Vietnam still can't account for almost a third of a million of its brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, North and South. And an equivalent number are permanently disabled from the war. When will the multitude be allowed to rest in peace? (Hayslip with Hayslip 1994, 327)

This is why Stone's film is so extraordinary despite its artistic shortcomings: just for once an American film-maker has taken time to hear the other out and to understand that a multitude of Vietnamese still have no voice to represent them. Had this been done earlier,

perhaps during the war—had time been taken, for instance, to read the letters and diaries written by young men and women who made up the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army—the result would have been the opposite of the “cultural and human ‘invisibility’” (Rowe and Berg 1991, 6) of the Vietnamese seen as the ‘enemy’. Stone’s decision not to frame Hayslip’s text within his own American voice may have disappointed those who expected him to give a more critical reading of Hayslip’s ‘exemplary’ life. Nevertheless, in this choice lies his real homage to those who were once the enemy: allowing himself to be just the transmitter between Hayslip and the wide cinema audiences that she wanted is a profound declaration of respect for her. Stone, however, seems to have been disappointed by the tepid reception of his one film devoted to impressing audiences with a message of peace and understanding. The film that follows *Heaven and Earth* in Stone’s filmography is *Natural Born Killers* (1994), a cynical, anti-sentimental film that forces audiences to consider why human reality can only be seen in America through the distorting filter of the ‘reality’ show. The fact that *Natural Born Killers* failed to receive an Oscar nomination, despite its innovating filmic language and its commercial success, is another sign of the confusion of critical values in front of important attempts at making real human suffering visible.

4. Misreading the Feminist Dystopia: Brian Gilbert’s *Not without my Daughter* (1991)

Betty Mahmoody’s autobiographical novel narrates her odyssey to leave Khomeini’s Iran, where she had become virtually a prisoner of her Iranian husband, with their four-year-old daughter Mahtob, between 1984 and 1986. The release of the screen adaptation in 1991 coincided with the Gulf War and was received, accordingly, with great opposition from Muslims living in the USA. This went as far as threats to the life of actress Sally Field, who played the main role in the film, which caused a delay in the European release due to fears of possible violent incidents. The total lack of sympathy in the portrait of the Iranians in the film, especially of Dr. Sayyed Mahmoody—Betty’s husband—led many to reject the film on the grounds of its being pro-American, anti-Islam propaganda, which indeed it is. Yet, the propaganda is so overt, so manifest, that it is difficult to miss seeing the ideology of the film and its staunch defence of the American legal system. However, two important points may be missed by attacking the pro-American ideology of the film: first, it implicitly reminds American citizens (Westerners in general) of the weakness of their own government to protect them in countries that do not respect human rights and second, the film stresses the fragility of women’s position in a world in which the rights of women are not the rights of man and in which only the women of Western societies are protected from abuse by the law. Taking an anti-American position before *Not without my Daughter* may thus be the equivalent of taking a position indifferent to the suffering of women without legal protection and this is a luxury that cannot be afforded by Western audiences.

Mahmoody narrated her personal tragedy to publicise the situation of about 1,000 cases like hers involving American women who had found out that being an American

citizen may not guarantee universal protection of the US State Department. She specified that her intention was cautionary, although some critics have seen in her warning an all-American xenophobia that can be reduced to a simplistic warning against marrying foreign men, when Mahmoody's intention was to stress the weakness of women's position in patriarchal legal systems such as that of Khomeini's Iran. Her narrative and the film present no doubt a biased contrast between an America portrayed as a haven of peace—"Mahtob and I ached to return to America, to normalcy, to sanity", Mahmoody writes (36)—and an Iran of oppression, fanaticism and barbarian habits that cannot fail to impress any Westerner with a sense of horror for Islam. Yet it is only too simple to stigmatise the film as a piece of pro-American political propaganda and, by dismissing Mahmoody's ordeal, miss the fact that the film has a universal value for women and for all members of Western societies. On the one hand, it allows the voice of an abused woman—deprived of her most fundamental rights—to be heard, which is in itself not as usual as it might seem despite the increasing attention devoted to the subject of abuse. On the other hand, it describes a nightmarish situation to which any person aware of the long struggle of women in the West to reach equality must necessarily react with sympathy. A sympathetic (female) reviewer described the film as *Sleeping with the (Iranian) Enemy* in reference to the film in which Julia Roberts played a woman terrorised by her abusive husband. However, it is more accurate to describe *Not without my Daughter* as a cross between this film and Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel in which the process by which women are deprived of their rights in a conservative America transformed into a Christian fundamentalist republic—as fanatic as fundamentalist Islam—is eerily similar to that endured by Mahmoody in Khomeini's Iran.

As happened with *Heaven and Earth*, *Not without my Daughter* was often criticized on the grounds of its being bad melodrama of a quality not superior to that of a film for TV. The choice of British director Brian Gilbert, a newcomer to Hollywood with only the comedy *Vice Versa* (1988) to his credit, was also questioned mainly on the grounds of his ignorance about Iran, though little was made of the fact that this very American film had been directed by a Briton. It was even suggested that the film had only been made as it was because of the interest of star Sally Field in the role, especially as Field is known for her political activism. However, if the film is a softer version of the book that rather blurs the edge of the actual horror lived by Mahmoody in Iran, this is actually due to the loss of the particularly female point of view and, hence, to the loss of a clear referent. The adapters were guilty of the same fault as the critics who turned their backs on the film—they failed to sympathize with Mahmoody's plea as a woman, and as a person, seeing in her an American citizen—a mistake that Stone did not make in relation to Le Ly Hayslip. Harrowing moments such as the one in which Mahmoody tears a IUD out of her womb rather than risk prison if Khomeinei's repressive police arrest her and detect the illegal contraceptive, or her enduring sex with a hateful husband who has robbed her of her right to return home and who has started beating her, do not have an equivalent in the film. The Betty Mahmoody who criticises the filthy streets of Tehran, the unhygienic habits of her sister-in-law's household in the preparation of food, the looks

of the children in her husband's aristocratic inbred family, and the squalor of an Iran impoverished by war is almost impossible to adapt for a sanitized Hollywood film. Yet even less adaptable is the woman who criticises men in general and who, far from defending American politics, declares that nobody should have been surprised when Irangate happened, as everybody knew in Iran that the USA were selling weapons to both sides in the war with Irak. Although Mahmoody showed her pleasure in the film and in Field's interpretation of her (despite the naiveté of Field's Betty), the fact is that the adaptation misses what Mahmoody calls the bittersweet quality of freedom, failing to question the fragility of the privileged Western world.

The compression of material habitual in screen adaptations has resulted in this case not only in the erasure of Betty Mahmoody's pragmatic feminist protest against the power of men on women sanctioned by legality, but also in the almost incomprehensible depiction of Dr. Sayyed Mahmoody as an arch-villain. This is not quite the case in the book, in which Mahmoody makes an impressive effort to understand how her husband changed despite her obvious fear and bitterness. A large section of her book is actually devoted to analysing what failed in the Americanization of Moody and why once back in his home country "the longer we remained in Iran, the more he succumbed to the unfathomable pull of his native culture" (69). In this sense, *Not without my Daughter* and *Heaven and Earth* are complementary, as the latter is an instance of how perfectly fathomable the pull of the other's native culture is if one is willing to listen. Because Moody's voice is missing in the book and in the film, and because only his dramatic lapse into brutality remains, both are inevitably biased. Betty's last words in her book are very different from the optimistic happy end in which she and Mahtob see an American flag in Turkey, a symbol of their happy return home. Instead she writes in the book:

Mahtob and I now live with the reality that we may never be free from Moody's ability to lash out at us from nearly half a world away. His vengeance could fall upon us at any time, in person, or through the vehicle of one of his innumerable legions of nephews. Moody knows that if he could somehow spirit Mahtob back to Iran, the laws of his alien society would support him completely. (69)

This 'fatwa' and the fact that Betty and Mahtob are living under assumed names in the USA may seem paranoia to some, but they bespeak a much uglier reality than that assumed by the screen adapters: women like Betty are in jeopardy because the powerful USA cannot guarantee their protection against abusive husbands, as much as an intellectual such as Salman Rushdie is still in danger because no Western country can guarantee his safety. Mahmoody's warning refers, then, to the weakness of the West before legal systems that do not recognize the rights of individuals to their own personal safety, and much less those of women. Up to a point—and from the point of view of any Western woman—it is irrelevant whether the abusive husband is Iranian or American; what counts is the sense of defencelessness before the abuser. It is, thus, a telling comment on the situation of Western societies that a film like *Not without my Daughter*

has mainly elicited negative reviews because it is artistically weak. Reviewers and audiences alike have been seemingly unimpressed by the fact that Betty's ordeal is but one case among 1,000 like hers and, therefore, the value of the film as a document about real human suffering has been disregarded.

5. Conclusions

Writing about the flurry of eyewitness accounts of the Vietnam war in fiction films, novels, personal records, documentaries, and docudramas, John Carlos Rowe cautions about the dangers of taking these particular intersections of the personal and the political for the whole picture of history. According to him, a revisionary desire aimed at exonerating the American 'people' and at scapegoating the government led to the production of personal accounts that pre-empted the need for a deeper analysis of the situation. "Certainly", he writes, "the best antidote for this tendency to confuse personal and direct impressions with understanding and scholarly knowledge is careful study of the historical and political forces informing any particular impression or experience" (1991, 149). This attitude necessarily applies to the three films I have dealt with in this article. They must be understood within a wider context, in which films that are adaptations of biographical or autobiographical material already adapted as literature, can be read against a background formed by the sum total of the testimonies of the eyewitnesses of the horror caused by contemporary politics. Their existence is valuable above artistic considerations, for films like these have the power to publicise historical events that pass relatively unnoticed when they are retold in books.

It would be necessary to consider how and why audiences who pay little attention to the hackneyed and sensationalist representation of the human suffering caused by historical forces as seen in the media can see these adaptations under a different light. And even more attention should be paid to the question of how the critical judgement of this type of adaptation interferes negatively with the respect for the eyewitnesses of horror that these films (and novels) demand and deserve—beyond their artistic values. Adaptations of this kind rely for their success on audiences mature enough to have learnt to read between the lines, so that the knowledge that these films are based on real life events will ideally lead them to seek more information about the facts that the film can narrate only with limitations. It is remarkable, thus, that while audiences generally understand the human drama lurking beneath good or bad melodrama, reviewers generally see the art before the heart and mislead their readers by using inappropriate critical standards that usually disregard the humanist message of the film.

The scholarly immersion in history has also resulted in the dangerous post-modernist confusion of all kinds of texts as fiction. As Jean Baudrillard writes, "*c'est ainsi qu'à force de scruter le nazisme, les chambres à gaz, etc., pour les analyser, ils sont devenus de moins en moins intelligibles et on a fini par poser logiquement cette question invraisemblable: 'Mais, au fond, est-ce que tout cela a vraiment existé?'*" (1990, 97). In order to avoid falling into the danger of not feeling the reality of the evil caused by the historical forces of the twentieth century, it is absolutely necessary to turn to the testimony

of eyewitnesses. But, since this testimony reaches us poorly—filtered through the often tendentious media and through Hollywood's frequent manipulations of reality—it seems necessary to build an artistic language that can overcome the post-modern rejection of sentimentalism avoiding, at the same time, the critic's confusion of the value of testimony with the value of the films. "In the twentieth century", Jane Todd writes, "when the taste is for the ironic and self-reflexive in literature, the impossibility of ironic interpretation makes the method of sentimental drama repellant. Characters stating their exemplariness become ridiculous and, acting in a plot, they seem opportunistic and smug" (1986, 142). How we have made the mistake of confusing the contrived exemplarity of sentimentalism with the courageous offer that the victims of history make in the sharing of their experiences of horror is a matter that must still be researched. The adaptations of *Schindler's List*, *Heaven and Earth* and *Not without my Daughter* are invitations to consider the limitations of the narrative techniques on which sentimentalism is based. They are also invitations to go beyond the limited portrait of human suffering and, as such, they deserve attention from sensitive audiences, ready to see reality in its truest colours.

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