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Tourists Lost in Venice: Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* and Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*

> Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*[1]

Joseph Brodsky's romance with Venice originated a long time before there existed the remotest possibility that he would ever be able to travel to that city, long before his emigration from the Soviet Union. His vision is prefigured by various artefacts which seem to symbolise, in their very material decay, the remote object of his longing: some novels by Henri de Régnier in moribund paperbacks, "published in the late thirties, with no bindings to speak of, disintegrating in your palm" (Brodsky 1992, 36f.), a coloured photograph of San Marco covered with snow, "an accordion set of sepia postcards" that his girlfriend's grandmother had "brought home from a pre-revolutionary honeymoon in Venice" (Brodsky 1992, 39), a piece of cheap tapestry depicting the Palazzo Ducale, a little copper gondola. Together with Visconti's film *Death in Venice*, seen in a "smuggled, and for that reason black-and-white, copy" (Brodsky 1992, 39), these items forge Brodsky's imaginary Venice. So, interestingly, even in the Soviet Union of the 1960s the image of Venice was reproduced and transmitted not only in literary representations and on the screen, but also on postcards, souvenirs, and bric-a-brac. These battered objects, having crossed the border from a hermetically sealed-off world, seem to carry with them, both metaphorically and metonymically, the fantasmatic kernel of Venetian associations: decay, desire, death. But the main point of Brodsky's retrospective account is not so much its imaginative content, but the evocation of Venice as a space of fantasy, a 'not-real', unattainable city.

"Venice is always the already written as well as the already seen, the already read." (Tanner 1992, 17). But it is, equally, always already framed by the tourist gaze, already reproduced by the tourist industry. The fictions on Venice after Henry James and Thomas Mann have to take into account the city's symbiotic and at the same time destructive relationship with mass travelling, as well as its status as an infinitely reproduced object of the literary text, the camera and the traveller's gaze. The mythic, poetic quality of Venice is thus undercut by the banality of mass travelling; in consequence, the tale of an individual's existential encounter with an erotic, faintly oriental Other, epitomised in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, can only be retold with an ironic edge.

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[1] Calvino 1979, 36.

In her study on Venice in literature Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann has observed that the lagoon city was in Fin-de-siècle writing a privileged site of "Kunstrealität", a highly aestheticized counter-space opposed to the 'hard' reality of a utilitarian, industrialised society - and as such, the 'ideal vanishing-point of tourism' (Corbineau-Hoffmann 1993, 293). While the association with tourism makes Venice economically viable, the city is at the same time becoming progressively uninhabitable for her native citizens. The effect for literary treatment is equally ambiguous: the 'polyphony of discourses' (Corbineau-Hoffmann 1993, 3) generated by this favourite counter-space threatens to smother Venice as a poetic and poetically productive locality.

Corbineau-Hoffmann postulates two modes in which recent literature tries to reconstitute that lost alterity, to transform Venice back from banal tourist haunt to a literary generative location: on the one hand, a heightened reflexivity about the intertextuality of any Venetian text, on the other hand a conscious distancing from referentiality. In the latter mode, Venice and well-known Venetian landmarks are not named; in this way, the textual geography is marked as imaginary.[2] In addition, the topic of tourism itself is put to productive use in many recent texts, as in the two narratives at which I will take a closer look, Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* and Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. The protagonists' specific situation as tourists is functionalized in the retelling of that old story, the visitor's encounter with an indecipherable, unnavigable, potentially lethal Venice. My aim now is to show that there is a strong connection between the characters' transitional status, the ambiguity of the city as it is perceived by them, and the male travellers' final death. Two questions are pertinent to my analysis. Firstly, what is the specific function of the Venetian setting - why Venice, and not, say, Florence?[3] Secondly, what is the meaning of 'transgression' in the texts? How is the notion of transgression linked to a discussion of the semantics of space, on one hand, and the question of gender difference, on the other?

Venice, according to Tony Tanner, is the embodiment of both polis and labyrinth: the consummation of reason and desire. Venice thus comprises the constructive and the subversive relationship between the city and desire (Tanner 1992, 2). In her physical shape, as labyrinth and as synthesis of stone and water, Venice is "the surpassing-all-

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[2] This "Poetik des Verschweigens" (Corbineau-Hoffmann 1993, 543) is the strategy employed in McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*. Another recent text which deals with the anxieties of travelling to Venice is E.Y. Meyer's *Venezianisches Zwischenspiel* (1997). Meyer equally treats Venice as a place of ambiguity, evil and despair where hungry tourists get lost. But his effort to reinterpret Venice turns out to be rather disappointing, precisely because his very concrete citations of place names - Harry's Bar etc. - fall into the trap of simply reiterating clichés. His topographic precision has the effect of a rather pretentious namedropping, instead of evoking the desired threatening atmosphere.

[3] Indeed, J.R. Banks asks 'why not Broadstairs?'. He maintains that McEwan's achievement would have been even greater, if he could have made his story work in a place devoid of the Venetian literary associations (Banks 1982, 27). Perhaps so; but, as I will argue, McEwan's choice of setting is not at all arbitrary; it is a necessary part of his text.

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other embodiment of that 'absolute ambiguity' which is radiant life containing death" (Tanner 1992, 368).

This paradoxical union grafted on the tangible location endows Venice with an "overpowering aura of unreality" (Ross 1994, 116). Michael Ross sees Venice as a city of desire, but, unlike Tanner, not of reason. In his view, Florence is the Italian city that welds vision and intellection, whereas perception in Venice remains on a purely sensual level. In Ross's study an Apollinian Florence is opposed to a dreamlike, erotically charged Venice, a stage-setting where fantasy displaces reality: "In narrative, Venice's dreamlike implausibility often endows it with an occult power to unhinge a character's sense of 'normal' reality." (Ross 1994, 116)

This 'unreality effect' can be linked to the workings of fantasy in the psychoanalytic sense. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis locate fantasy "within the domain of opposition between subjective and objective, between an inner world, where satisfaction is obtained through illusion, and an external world, which gradually, through the medium of perception, asserts the supremacy of the reality principle" (Laplanche/Pontalis 1986, 6). In addition, they define fantasy not as the object, but as the setting of desire (Laplanche/Pontalis 1986, 26). In this sense Venice works, in literary texts, as a space of fantasy: a liminal realm where desire can be enacted. Ultimately, the power at work in this fantasmatic structure turns out to be a desire for death.[4]

Another crucial dimension of fantasy consists in its dynamic creativity: to fantasise is not a process passively undergone by the subject, but a productive act. This observation is not only valid in reference to fantasy as wish-fulfilment, but as a way of dealing with negative emotions or memories, such as fear, loss and horror. According to Slavoj Žižek, fantasy *creates* the horror it purports to conceal, as its 'repressed' point of reference. Fantasy in Žižek 's definition "mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality - that is to say, it provides a 'schema' according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure" (Žižek 1997, 7). As will be shown, this corresponds closely to the way in which the tourists in both texts select elements from the actual environment and work them into the fabric of their, mostly unconscious, desire.

This cursory glance at the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy allows us to reveal a structural analogy between fantasy and tourism, based on two crucial features: a liminal status - the incessant negotiation between two different levels of reality - and a creative potential, the ability to generate, transform and incorporate 'real' elements into a larger imaginary syntax. The cluster of connotations worked out by Tanner, Ross and Corbineau-Hoffmann permits us to describe Venice as a privileged site for the literary representation of the interaction between tourism and fantasy. To further clarify the

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[4] At least in Thomas Mann's seminal story. In a further turning of the screw, the protagonists of du Maurier's and McEwan's texts actively seek out the place of their killing and the person of the killer, as if they secretly desired to meet their end.

indwelling relationship between these domains, it is pertinent to take a look at some theories of tourism as a last step prior to my textual analysis.

Venice is the city of paradox, Venice is the city of tourism. But then, according to German sociologist Christoph Hennig, tourism itself has to be seen as a fairly paradoxical enterprise. Hennig defines tourism as the sensual experience of imaginary worlds. We physically travel in immaterial countries. Travelling takes place in a liminal realm between reality and phantasy, i.e. there is a continuous slipping between an imaginary frame - the 'pictures in our minds' - and real acts (driving, shopping) or the real environment (bad weather, the topography of the foreign place).

Our expectations and hence our experiences are prefigured by literature and film, by our culturally encoded imagination, our individual wishes and dreams, as the above mentioned example of Brodsky's recollection clearly shows. But tourists do not only - as it were passively - reproduce certain gestures: taking pictures, gazing at monuments, endlessly repeating a stale, second-hand experience. As Hennig maintains, travelling is a creative act; indeed, he compares the tourist to an author who selects bits and pieces from the real world and incorporates them into his fiction. Of course, Hennig does not claim a complete equivalence between art and travelling. But he does contend that the construction of the tourist experience is comparable to other forms of symbolic production. Now, the travellers in *Don't Look Now* and *The Comfort of Strangers* also take part in the constructivist activity of tourism, but it is my purpose to show that they or, in fact, the male partners, fail to complete their task in some crucial way. Their failure to project themselves as proper tourists is an important factor in their trajectory towards death.

What is the ultimate gain of travelling? Hennig conceives of travelling as the periodical crossing of a border to a realm with a different reality status. The tourist leaves behind the strictures of his everyday life, the well-regulated relations to his social environment, the limits of his social identity. The traveller's anonymity allows a certain amount of socially transgressive behaviour and of experimentation with one's identity. Hennig compares these possibilities of travelling to those of carnival which can equally be defined as a limited period when rules are revoked. So, in a nutshell, the psychic value of tourism consists in the possibility of transgressing without running into danger. The return to your home country is, or seems, guaranteed. But literature almost by definition explores the irreversible crossing of a boundary: the protagonist is so transformed by his encounter with the Other that he will not be able to return as the same person, or not at all - that he will die. The stories by du Maurier and McEwan explore these very questions of boundary crossing and of the suspension of clear-cut dichotomies.

Whereas Christoph Hennig emphasises the fictional element of the tourist experience, John Urry stresses its oppositional structure. He sees tourism as a 'deviant' practice, counteracting but dependent on the structures of everyday life. The tourist gaze, which is socially and historically variable, "is constructed in relationship to its opposite" (Urry 1990, 2). It is further constructed through anticipatory activities such

as daydreaming, fantasy and the consumption of films, tv programs, books, magazines etc. It is directed to such features of the landscape which separate them off from everyday experience. Finally, the tourist gaze is characterised by its reduplication: the view of a site is captured by photographs or videofilms and can be then reproduced infinitely.

An important feature of tourism is, as both Urry and Jonathan Culler point out, the search for the authentic. But the authentic is a problematical category:

> The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes. [...] The authentic sight requires markers, but our notion of the authentic is the unmarked. (Culler 1988, 164)

Venice is a perfect trope for this dilemma: it is so abundantly marked and overdetermined, that the very stones of Venice seem to be quotations. It works as a tourist attraction precisely through its loss of authenticity, through its acquired quality as a many-layered palimpsest. This makes Venice the ideal site for 'post-tourism', a term coined by Maxine Feifer.

> 'Post-tourists' find pleasure in the multiplicity of tourist games. They know that there is *no* authentic tourist experience, that there are merely a series of games or texts that can be played. (Urry 1990, 11)

The couples in *Don't Look Now* and *The Comfort of Strangers* construct their holiday experience through games and rituals, and they use touristic props - guide-books, maps - with a certain amount of self-consciousness and even irony. However, they don't take photographs - a crucial break of tourist etiquette, indicative of their problematic status, their sliding from subject to object of the gaze. The visitors' detachment towards the artificial environment of 'Venice World' breaks down as the stories progress. Their constructivist activity collides with a reality that offers resistance to their selective gaze and their manipulative readings.

Evidently, there are important differences between both texts. Du Maurier's tourists are, in spite of a certain amount of playfulness, more serious about their 'duties' as tourists. Particularly Laura is an impeccable tourist who conscientiously takes on the position prescribed by the guidebook. She is more successful in her negotiations with the city than the sceptical John; he tries to maintain his individualistic stance in opposition to the crowd's perspective. In a way, *Don't Look Now* is an affirmation of the credulous and passive attitude of the package tourist. Those who are able to believe - in the guidebook or in a parapsychological message - will survive, the sceptics will be killed. By contrast, *The Comfort of Strangers* offers a complete deconstruction of the traditional tourist experience, and even of 'post-tourism'. Colin and Mary are, from their own point of view, indeed post-tourists who play at 'being on holiday'. But this rather lofty stance is subverted when it becomes clear that they, the subjects of the

tourist gaze, have in reality been the objects of a secret gaze directed at them from the city.

On the level of plot, there are some striking parallels between both narratives; indeed, *The Comfort of Strangers* is a strong but unmarked intertext of *Don't Look Now*. In each of the texts, a couple travels together to Venice after several years of marriage or of a shared life. Both couples, and especially the male partners, prove to be particularly inadequate tourists. They get lost geographically and cognitively,[5] with fatal consequences: their disorientation and misinterpretation are directly contributive factors to the final catastrophe.

Don't Look Now sets in with an exchange of glances between Laura and John and the unnamed twin sisters who will later relay a spiritist message from the couple's dead daughter Christine. Having lunch at a restaurant in Torcello, John notices "a couple of old girls two tables away who are trying to hypnotise me" (du Maurier 1972, 9). Immediately, husband and wife begin to play a game about the sisters' identity, a game centered on the gender ambiguity of the twins' appearance: the "old girls" turn in Laura's playful invention into male twins in drags, "criminals doing the sights of Europe, changing sex at each stop", possibly "[j]ewel thieves or murderers" (9). The final version of their identity constructed by John and Laura is a most commonplace one: "a couple of pathetic old retired schoolmistresses on holiday, who've saved up all their lives to visit Venice" (10). But John retains a feeling of unease which is generated by the empty gaze of one of the women who, as it later turns out, is blind. Her unseeing eyes are perceived by John as disagreeably intent and penetrating:

> Two can play at the game. He blew a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air and smiled at her, he hoped offensively. She did not register. The blue eyes continued to hold his, so that finally he was obliged to look away himself, extinguish his cigarette, glance over his shoulder for the waiter and call for the bill. (13)

John can't read the sister's gaze as blindness, and he perceives the twins as uncanny because of their doubleness and gender ambiguity. The exchange of glances shows the vulnerability of his 'maleness' and also his own 'blindness', his deficiency in decoding the semiotic system of the foreign locality.

The confrontation with the blind woman's unseeing but penetrating eyes results in a distortion of John's clear and single vision. For the rest of the story, the sisters keep obtruding on his real or mental line of sight, further disturbing his cognitive power. By contrast, Laura, who accepts the guidance of the blind - i.e. she believes in Christine's message of warning 'transmitted' by the blind sister - is enabled to perform the quintessential task of the tourist: she goes sightseeing. She follows the fixed perspective of the guidebook; if her field of vision is not free and original, yet an aesthetic experience of art is accessible to her - but not to John:

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[5] This intellectual disorientation ties in with Michael Ross's analysis of Venice as a domain of sensuality, not rationality.

> Laura, undaunted, asked her husband for the guidebook, and, as had always been her custom in happier days, started to walk slowly through the cathedral, studying mosaics, columns, panels from left to right, while John, less interested, because of his concern at what had just happened, followed close behind, keeping a weather eye alert for the twin sisters. [...] But the anonymous, shuffling tourists, intent upon culture, could not harm her, although from his own point of view they made artistic appreciation impossible. He could not concentrate, the cold clear beauty of what he saw left him untouched, and when Laura touched his sleeve, pointing to the mosaic of the Virgin and Child standing above the frieze of the Apostles, he nodded in sympathy yet saw nothing [...].(16f.)

John's intuition is right when he feels a sense of doom after the sisters' warning. He is too much caught up in his role as rational male to be able to follow his feelings, but at the same time he fails to deal analytically with the palpable evidence of danger that is successively presented to him. His cognitive blindness is connected with the topographical disorientation of the tourist. At first, the liminal position between familiarity and strangeness creates an exhilarating feeling of liberation and importance; the travellers appear to create the world they visit:

> The bedroom was familiar, like home, with Laura's things arranged neatly on the dressing table, but with it the little festive atmosphere of strangeness, of excitement, that only a holiday bedroom brings. This is ours for the moment, but no more. While we are in it we bring it life. When we have gone it no longer exists, it fades into anonymity. (20)

The tourist's gaze defines and transforms the place which exists, as it seems, only for him. At the same time, the oscillation between familiarity and strangeness allows the tourist to ease temporarily the burden of his identity. In the hotel room which is like home and yet different, festive, anonymous, it becomes possible for John and Laura to hold in abeyance the pain about Christine's death and, for the first time after their loss, to make love. Especially John interprets this act as a new beginning, a reinvention of their marriage, and a laying of ghosts. But the exhilarating moment when reality and memory are suspended passes quickly. The tourist's freedom to reinvent himself is superseded almost immediately by a deep-felt sense of displacement. The following passage, the couple's search for a restaurant, is overlaid with images of death, pointing back to Christine's decease and forward to John's murder. In this long sequence, the importance of the Venetian setting becomes clear: the narration is able to exploit the rich symbolism of the place to evoke the imagery, not only of death, but of perverse sexuality and violent death. The canals, so picturesque in daytime, are now dark and dank, the gondolas - not exactly an original trope - look like coffins (21f.). John now experiences the breakdown of the tourist's constructivist activity: he is no longer able to sustain the received image of a bright, glittering city. His romantic construction collides with a different 'reality', a reality, however, that is no more 'authentic' than the Venice of honeymoons. The lost tourists now enter the Venice of the Gothic tradition.

Adrift in an unknown quarter, John has the crucial encounter on his voyage towards death, without however recognising its importance or, rather, completely misreading

its significance. After the visit to Torcello, John had imagined Christine running alongside the canal. Now he sees a scene that seems to mirror his fantasy of the lost daughter: a 'child' in a pixie hood, fleeing across a canal. In reality, this is an adult woman dwarf responsible for several murders. John explicitly connects this scene with Christine's death. He mistakes the running figure for a little girl in danger and fantasises about protecting her. Again it is Laura, the less imaginative, 'blind' average tourist, who comes closer to the truth. While missing the sight of the 'child', she yet seizes upon the one crucial sign of violence, the strangled cry of the murder victim heard just an instant before the fleeing figure's emergence. Laura understands that Venice is not just an artificial paradise but exists on the same reality level as any English town - including real crime and a working city administration. But her sensible proposal to call the police is rejected: "'Oh, for heaven's sake,' said John. Where did she think she was - Piccadilly?" (22)

John and Laura perceive Venice in an entirely different way. Laura's approach is straightforward, commonsensical and unoriginal; she represents the stance of the package tourist, happy to be shepherded to the obvious sites. And she is the survivor.[6] By contrast, John's attitude is much more complicated. One the one hand, he is - or poses as - the individualistic traveller who wants to lead the way, to make discoveries by himself.[7] He is imaginative and emotional - he constantly worries about the state of Laura's nerves, but it is he who is on the verge of hysteria throughout the story. On the other hand, John is a stickler for propriety. He wants to avoid any confusion of categories - hence his fear of the twins - especially of the categories that are at stake here: gender difference and the distinction between life and death. This is precisely why he so adamantly refuses to accept the sisters' assertion that he is 'psychic' - "You are somehow *en rapport* with the unknown, and I'm not." (28), as Laura tells him -, that he of all people should be able to cross the most decisive of borders and commune with his dead daughter.

Why is John killed? Is he 'punished' for being a potentially transgressive figure or precisely for his refusal to transgress? At any rate, it is this conflict that leads to John's fatal cognitive failure. Venice becomes a space where he can act out his fantasy about the returned daughter. In accordance with Žižek 's concept of fantasy as a creative negotiation with horror, John seizes upon a positively given object - the hooded girl - in order to restructure the trauma of his daughter's death. To protect this fantasy, even from Laura, he has to stave off the intruding reality. He ignores both Christine's 'message' - ironically, in du Maurier's story the supernatural sides with the banal - and

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[6] Actually, Laura is a more interesting character in Nicholas Roeg's film based on du Maurier's story, mainly thanks to Julie Christie's performance. For a comparison between film and story see Schröder 1987; see also Sabine Schülting's essay in this volume.

[7] John's search for the authentic ends in minor disasters, signalling the greater resilience of Laura's attitude. For instance at the restaurant - "Mostly Italians - that meant the food would be good." (du Maurier 1972, 24), John thinks - which they finally reach, Laura orders scampi without even consulting the menu; John chooses a 'genuinely Italian' dish of boiled pork which proves perfectly inedible.

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rational indicators of danger: police reports about the murders, his wife's cautions, the victim's cry he heard with his own ears.

When he encounters the running figure for the second time, his longing to protect and save a child, his child, hinders him from following his intuitive urge to run away. He correctly connects the appearance of the child with the murders, but he misreads the clues: the supposed victim is the killer, the would-be protector is the dupe of his own blindness. Only in the very last moment of his life does his vision come into focus:

> The child struggled to her feet and stood before him, the pixie hood falling from her head onto the floor. He stared at her, incredulity turning to horror, to fear. It was not a child at all but a little thickset woman dwarf, about three feet high, with a great square adult head too big for her body, grey locks hanging shoulder length, and she wasn't sobbing anymore, she was grinning at him, nodding her head up and down. (60f.)

Again, as in the beginning, John is paralysed by an old woman's gaze. But this time the danger is real: Little Red Riding Hood has turned into Medusa. John's belated clear-sightedness is no longer important. The subject of the gaze is now the other; John can only look at the murderer looking at him, the victim.

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, tourism is treated as a slightly unpleasant duty, taking place in a state of waiting. The transitional tourist status is experienced by Colin and Mary as a progressive detachment from reality and a loss of agency. They become increasingly unfit to communicate - with each other and the outside world - or to take care of themselves: they live in a state of child-like dependence from the hotel maid and other providers for their comforts. Although they "dutifully fulfilled the many tasks of tourism the ancient city imposed" (McEwan 1982, 14), yet, encumbered by their identity as a long-established couple, they fail as existential travellers, as explorers of the unknown:

> Alone, perhaps, they each could have explored the city with pleasure, followed whims, dispensed with destinations and so enjoyed or ignored being lost. There was much to wonder at here, one needed only to be alert and to attend. But they knew one another much as they knew themselves, and their intimacy, rather like too many suitcases, was a matter of perpetual concern; [...] and they would continue to 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. (14f.)

In contrast to du Maurier's story which works with binary oppositions and comes down on the side of conventional Laura, *The Comfort of Strangers* neither endorses the mass tourist perspective nor that of the individual traveller: Colin and Mary are 'blind' when they follow the guide book, but they get lost when they leave the hotel without their maps. Being a tourist in Venice is described here as a dreamlike state where action seems to be impossible:

> Since their arrival, they had established a well-ordered ritual of sleep, preceded on only one occasion by sex, and now the calm, self-obsessed interlude during which they carefully groomed themselves

before their dinner-time stroll through the city. In this time of preparation, they moved slowly and rarely spoke. They used expensive, duty-free colognes and powders on their bodies, they chose their clothes meticulously and without consulting the other, as though somewhere among the thousands they were soon to join, there waited someone who cared deeply how they appeared. (13)

This entropic state is energised only by the entrance of Robert, the third party to a game they don't know they are playing. Robert is the person for whom they were unconsciously preparing, the one who cared about their appearance. The friendly stranger had been stalking the beautiful Colin from the beginning of their stay. Robert has chosen him as the ideal victim in a sadomasochistic ritual which he carries out together with his crippled wife Caroline. Colin and Mary will find out that they have been framed, literally caught in the frame of Robert's camera and in the frame of his plot. But Robert can entice them into his game only because he has got something to offer that reaches out to their desire and opens Venice, hitherto retreating from their grasp, as a space of fantasy. Whereas John in *Don't Look Now* was ready to enter the fantasmatic structure of Venice because his desire was already 'activated' by his daughter's loss, Colin and Mary, the saturated post-tourists, have to be pricked into desire, pleasure and pain through an exterior agent. What Robert has to offer is, firstly, a narrative structure and, secondly, an affirmation of identity - that is, a return to a state before post-modernism.

McEwan's novel can legitimately be considered as a post-modern text in the sense of John Barth's 'literature of exhaustion'.[8] Indeed, the most consequent stylistic proceeding in *The Comfort of Strangers* is a radical depletion, a *désubstantialisation* at work on all levels of the narrative - the use of the Venetian setting, the *dramatis personae* and the plot. As a result, the text is marked by a reluctance to formulate a transcendent meaning, by an "ontologie faible": "Là réside la véritable altérité du texte, paradoxale, fondée sur l'absence du dépassement métaphysique, sur la fin du tragique et l'antimythe." (Duperray 1989, 300). In an interesting move, however, McEwan incorporates the orthodox metaphysical plot into the structure of his text, by embodying it in the figure of Robert. Before their encounter with Robert, Colin and Mary find themselves in a state defined by stasis and lack of differentiation. Robert's world is, on the contrary, both dynamic and reactionary - and strangely alluring, at the same time as it is revolting.[9]

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[8] Barth's essay - first published in 1966, the year McEwan began writing fiction (cf. Slay 1996, 1) - diagnoses a "used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (Barth 1982, 1) in contemporary literature; the traditional - pre-Joycean - form of the novel is no longer a valid model. The novelist's response advocated by Barth is not decadent languor, but rather a kind of concentration which "reflects and deals with ultimacy, both technically and thematically" (Barth 1982, 5), as in the work of Beckett and Borges. McEwan can be seen as belonging to this tradition, since he parts way with the humanist ballast of classical novels, nonetheless retaining a subtle insight into the human condition.

[9] A strong criticism of McEwan from a feminist perspective can be found in Roger 1996. She claims that *Comfort* does not challenge Caroline's masochistic submission and Robert's patriarchal domination; she accuses McEwan of being "complicit in subscribing the patriarchal power structures which the novel seeks to criticize" (Roger 1996, 18). In opposition, Christina Byrnes observes, with

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The narrative frame which finally encloses the tourists is Robert's dualistic concept of gender, performed in his marriage to Caroline. In contrast to Colin and Mary's emancipated partnership and politically advanced notions of gender, Robert and Caroline enact the traditional gender roles up to the point of caricature. The British visitors experience an uneasy mixture of fascination and repulsion at the spectacle of sado-masochistic pleasure that is flaunted before them. Their visit to Robert's Venetian palace, a shrine to patriarchal values, triggers off a series of transgressive erotic fantasies; their love-making reaches a long-lost intensity. At last, Venice begins to fulfil the promise of the city of lust and desire, instead of being the disappointing, crowded venue of mass tourism.

Robert equally provides them with a precarious possibility of identification. Paradoxically, it is the appellation as tourists that puts them under his spell: "'Are you tourists?' he asked in self-consciously precise English and, beaming, answered himself. 'Yes, of course you are.'" (26) Although the role of a tourist is by definition an unstable, transitional condition, Colin and Mary are posited by this invocation within a fixed frame of reference. Initially Robert, appearing as an "authentic citizen" (30), satisfies their craving for recognition. As he takes them to his bar, frequented exclusively by Italian men, he allows Colin and Mary to see themselves for the first time as tourists "making a discovery" (29).[10] Thus in their first encounter, Robert offers them a possibility of self-definition and self-recognition. However, the binary opposition of tourist and native is, like all other dichotomies built up in this text, swiftly undercut: Robert is not an 'authentic' Venetian; raised abroad and married to a Canadian, he is partly alienated from his native city, a stranger himself. This precarious construction of a signifying network, based on multiple shifts of meaning rather than stable binarisms, marks an important difference to *Don't Look Now*.

Being a tourist entails, according to the sociological approach of Hennig and others, a transitory status, a constructivist activity, and transgression without danger. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, we rather find danger without transgression. When Colin and Mary come into contact with Venice, the city of desire, through Robert's mediation, they are enabled to articulate their fantasies, but not to act them out. The perverse wishes they whisper into each other's ears never cross the border from imagination to real acts. Unlike the visitors, Robert and Caroline really stage their desire: they want to join passion and death by murdering Colin as part of their sexual consummation, thus achieving a perfect pitch of *jouissance*. So from one perspective, Robert and Caroline appear as transgressive figures; Colin and Mary remain within the boundaries of 'decent' behaviour. Like John in du Maurier's story, they don't dare to transgress. But on the other hand, the English visitors do participate to some extent in Robert's game, and they are the representatives of a category crisis - a dissolution of gender distinctions - that is transgressive on a different level.

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some justification, that the text's close observation of these attitudes, which may appear as a lack of critical distance, serves to heighten its disturbing effect (Byrnes 1995, 321).

[10] This discovery of an 'authentic' place unknown to other tourists echoes John and Laura's visit to the restaurant frequented by 'real Italians', where they, however, meet the spiritist sisters.

Both couples apparently engage themselves in a scopophilic partnership, the exhibitionistic desire of Colin and Mary finding a willing eye in Robert's teleobjective. By entering into this unspoken contract, the visitors unwittingly accept the notions of gender voiced earlier by Robert and Caroline, which come down in the final consequence to the simplistic binarism that men kill and women submit to being killed. So within this frame of reference set up by Robert, the English couple as a whole takes on the female part. But then, another shift disturbs the binary structure of the couples when Mary is cast in the role of the spectator, and Colin is singled out as the surrogate victim - for Caroline - in the sadomasochistic game; Caroline[11] shifts her position from the passive to the active side of the sexual scheme.

From Robert's point of view, Colin is the representative figure of gender-crossing. He is both a man and a feminized object of desire. By killing him with the most patriarchal of weapons, his grandfather's and father's razor, Robert punishes him for that transgression and reaffirms his own notions of gender. He punishes Mary for appropriating the male gaze by forcing her to watch the killing of her lover. He ascribes to her the voyeuristic position and thus separates her from Colin whom he has pinned down - both metaphorically and literally - on the opposite side of the scopophilic equation. The strange encounter seems to end, on a symbolic level, with the victory of a 'strong' over a 'weak ontology'. But in fact, this ending - "la banalisation de cette aventure sanglante" (Duperray 1989, 297) - is 'exhausted': McEwan's text has divested itself of that metaphysical fullness that saturates du Maurier's narration.

Don't Look Now and *The Comfort of Strangers* refer to Venice as a paradigmatic location where literature, fantasy and tourism interlock. In both texts, Venice is presented as an almost unreal, deceptive, highly ambiguous city. Nevertheless, the strategic use of the setting is entirely distinctive. Du Maurier's Venice is a place sated with stereotype, employed to heighten the atmosphere of horror in an, ultimately, fairly conventional Gothic story. McEwan's use of the location couldn't be more different: his Venice is radically emptied of referentiality, at least in so far as a conventional 'Venicity' is concerned. The concrete references to 'reality' serve to dislocate the myth of Venice, be it the glittering tourist haunt or the Gothic city of dark narrow canals. This most mythically charged place is used in the service of anti-myth. By adopting this strategy, McEwan deconstructs the received touristic stance - which is upheld in *Don't Look Now* - and regains Venice as an alienating counter-space.

Given this divergent function of the setting, it is evident that fantasy and transgression, too, work on different levels. *Don't Look Now* endorses a humanistic psychology; John's hovering on a mental borderline is fully explained in terms of his character and individual history. Transgression here means the crossing of a border, but the border itself remains firmly established. *The Comfort of Strangers* equally presents us with an aetiological explanation of Robert's sadistic drive; but the memory

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[11] Caroline exchanges with Colin her position as victim; this congruence of functions is indicated by the similarity of their names.

of his childhood rather operates as a 'screen-explanation' - analogous to Freud's concept of 'screen-memory' - that not only fails to give a satisfactory answer to the enigma of his personality, but rather covers up the lack of such an enigma. Significantly, the main protagonists Colin and Mary are not fitted out with a similar psychological background. The figures in *Comfort* are defined by their positionality, not by inherent qualities. They are 'depleted' in a way that is collateral to the text's treatment of Venice.

Consequently, the question of transgression is subsumed under a different heading. The focus lies not on individual acts; rather, the text deals with the process of constructing opposite fields of signification. The gesture that draws a line across a field and thus produces difference is put *en abîme* in the narrative, which juxtaposes two competing orders: Robert is the representative of a dualistic scheme, expressed in his theory of a hierarchical gender distinction. Because he believes in this order, he is able to realise his transgressive desire. Robert is contrasted to Mary and Colin, who do not wish to cross a border - at the same time affirming it - but to dissolve and disappear. They yearn for reaching the vanishing point of the tourist's transitionality:

> To step down there now as if completely free, to be released from the arduous states of play of psychological condition, to have leisure to be open and attentive to perception, to the world whose breathtaking, incessant cascade against the senses was so easily and habitually ignored, dimned out, in the interests of unexamined ideals of personal responsibility, efficiency, citizenship, to step down there now, just walk away, melt into the shadow, would be so very easy. (McEwan 1982, 104f.)

But they even lack the limited power of agency required for this dream of self-effacement. Instead of turning away into the empty street, Colin, trapped, follows Robert.

The geometrical configuration of McEwan's novel could suggest that it fails to transcend the dichotomy personified by Robert - that Robert 'wins'. I want to propose, on the contrary, that *The Comfort of Strangers* does not end with a 'solution', a taking of sides, as does *Don't Look Now*. Robert's success is possible only within his binary frame of reference that conveys depth, ontology and 'master narrative'. But this frame does not usurp the entire text. When Mary, in the novel's final scene, sits by Colin's side in the mortuary, she indeed seems to be sucked in by the world of Robert and Caroline. She struggles for an explanation that echoes their pronouncements on gender: "her theory [...] which explained how the imagination, the sexual imagination, men's ancient dream of hurting, and women's of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organising principle" (125). But the order of depth and single organising principles is displaced by the competing order associated with surface, positionality and silence: "But she explained nothing, for a stranger had arranged Colin's hair the wrong way. She combed it with her fingers and said nothing at all." (125). The novel ends with Mary's silence. The reader can now choose between the gross banality of Robert's exegetical efforts and the opacity of Mary's final attitude, a still, minute registering of external details. The tension between the two modes of signification is sustained in the text. The fact that it is feminist Mary who tries to

collapse of binary structures, of the text's resistance to closure. But despite this persisting openness, surely the more intelligent and aesthetically pleasing response offered in the novel is that quiet attention to details with which it ends.

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'Dream Factories':

Hollywood and Venice in Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*

In August 1998, a short article in the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented on the news that Felice Laudadio, manager of the 55th Venetian film festival, had addressed the public with the desperate plea to help him find appropriate hotel suites for the stars. Unexpectedly, Robert de Niro, Warren Beatty and Steven Spielberg had decided to come to Venice, each accompanied by a crew of several dozens. "No room for the grooms?" - Not without irony, the journalist pondered about the reasons for this logistic disaster, and wondered whether instead of holding Venice responsible, one should not rather seek the reasons for this awkward situation in Hollywood: "Verführt von den Bildern der eigenen Traumfabrik: seit Jahrzehnten kommt kein Kinojahr ohne Filme in und um Venedig aus [...]."[1] The filmstars, the author argued, were attracted by cinema itself, which, since its beginnings, had stylised Venice as the dream-city *par excellence*. Actually, only recently Venice appeared in Paul Schrader's *The Comfort of Strangers*, in Oliver Parker's adaptation of *Othello*, in Iain Softley's *The Wings of the Dove* and in Woody Allen's *Everyone Says I Love You*. Venice may not be the appropriate city for real-life actors, but it certainly is one of the most important settings for movies.

The representation of Venice in Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's novella, *Don't Look Now*, can thus hardly be regarded as original. Roeg - like other directors - shows the beautiful lagoon, the maze of canals and narrow alleys as well as Venice's decay. I would maintain, though, that Roeg's *Don't Look Now* is not just another example of Hollywood's fascination with Venice, which, in turn, has been fed by innumerable pictorial and textual representations of Venice since the early modern age. In his seminal book, *Venice Desired*, Tony Tanner writes that

> as spectacle - the beautiful city *par excellence*, the city of art, the city *as* art - and as a spectacular example [...], Venice became an important, I would say central, site (a topos, a topic) for the European imagination.[2]

Although Tanner does not analyse cinematic representations of Venice, his description applies equally well to the movies. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Hollywood has appropriated the topoi and has thus continued the seemingly endless production of fantasies around Venice. Very often, films on Venice have adapted literary representations of Venice: *Morte a Venezia*, *The Comfort of Strangers* or *The Wings of the Dove* are obvious examples. Yet Venice in Roeg's film is more than

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[1] *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 August 1998, 13.
[2] Tanner 1992, 4.