Teaching Different Cultures through Film

Educating Rita and *My Beautiful Laundrette*

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1. Introduction: Film Analysis as an Approach to Other Cultures

Most of what young people around the world learn about other cultures comes from feature films. From an early age they can *see* on their TV screens what foreign places look like and what the people there do, how they behave and solve their problems. Parents and educationalists occasionally worry about certain foreign values and forms of behaviour that may unconsciously *influence* their children's outlook on life at home. But *to understand* why so many things in the filmic representation of another culture are (or rather are seen as) different – this is an aim for which children and parents alike still need training.

In principle, one can learn as much about another culture from a good novel as from a good film if one has spent as much time on the latter as on the former, and if one has learned to 'read' a film as one has learned to read a novel. In the early eighties, Paul G. Buchloh found out that although 60–70 % of his students of English knew only the film versions of English literary classics they were convinced they knew enough of the works and their significance in the literary and cultural tradition (cf. Buchloh 1982: I, 15). Buchloh's hope at the time was that reading the literary originals would be made more attractive again if their film adaptations were studied comparatively (i.e. as translations from one medium into another).

In the meantime, however, the role of film as a mere incentive to reading literature has given way to a new paradigm. At US colleges, English departments began to offer film appreciation classes in their general education programmes; and publishers had casebooks compiled on films that were regarded as classics in their own right and not as derivative. Now dozens of film scripts are published every year, and most films are available on video; they can easily be copied for classroom use and studied at home or in libraries. For teachers and students of English (and other) cultures this has created an alternative 'third' approach between personal experience abroad and literary experience at home. Many films in English have become global bestsellers and are known to more people than any printed work of fiction can ever be. If taught by someone well-trained to teach their language and their cultural significance, films from or about a different culture can contribute more than 'mere' literature to making more learners create new, intercultural meanings, or 'a culture of a third kind' for themselves, by way of an apprenticeship in cultural difference (cf. Kramsch 1993: 235).

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Foreign culture on film is highly concentrated and, as it were, served up and taken in fast. What the average viewer perceives is mainly what (s)he can identify and follow quickly, what would make sense in his/her own culture, and what has become familiar through previous encounters with the foreign culture. Characters and settings are precise physical realities; one does not have to strive to recognise or imagine them. But many things go unnoticed, and cultural contexts and connotations remain vague or unrecognized. Viewers reading the book version of a successful film are often surprised at what they have overlooked or misunderstood – although their previous viewing experience had seemed complete and satisfying.

The well-known experience that a film version of a novel usually disappoints readers is partly due to the lack of 'aids to interpretation' that a novel usually gives. In the following extract from *A Passage to India*, a hint as to the cultural meaning of an action is provided for the readers: "[Hamidullah] raised his voice suddenly and shouted for dinner. Servants shouted back that it was ready. *They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood, for nobody moved.*" (Forster 1979: 32; my italics) Telling someone what they want to hear instead of the truth is a significant feature of the culture described in the novel, and as such it is important in the web of Anglo-Indian cultural conflict that constitutes the main theme of the novel. If this little scene were to be filmed, this cultural interpretation would have to be inferred from the fact that "nobody" in the little group of Indians "moved" to the dining room.

Understanding, and communicating about, foreign culture on film then requires much interpretive effort on the part of viewers. In a sense, they will have to experiment, developing alternative descriptions, deciding on the most plausible, and perhaps not even arriving at the right one. Thus, in a sense, the student of a film from a foreign culture will have to become a writer himself, an ascriber of significance, an 'inventor' of possible cultural meanings. In order to achieve this (s)he will have to 'slow down' his/her viewing in order to be able to take longer and repeated looks – the video-recorder is the decoder of cultural meaning on film.

The result of this descriptive effort may not always be satisfactory, but it involves the student in a process of understanding that is quite different from the 'understanding' created by the immediacy of a film's impact. To adapt Raymond Williams: We learn to see a foreign culture by learning to describe it; we interpret the incoming sensory information by known rules or, particularly in the case of foreign cultures, by new rules which we can try to learn; we struggle to describe certain new information for which our conventional descriptions are inadequate. This vital effort is literally a way of seeing new things and new relationships. Description is a function of communication, and we can best understand film and culture if we look at this vital relationship in which experience has to be described to be realized, this description being, in fact, the putting of experience into a communicable form. In this respect, we may conclude that the cultural description and interpretation of film is an activity reflecting the ordinary social process (cf. Williams 1965: 40).

On the other hand, film, just like any other fiction, is (re-)structured, (re-) organised, highly concentrated reality. Following James Monaco, one can say that literature is quite similar to film as far as paradigmatic connotation is concerned. The connotative sense we comprehend stems from the word or shot being compared, not necessarily consciously, with other potential shots in the same paradigm. Descriptive technique and point of view achieve in literature what a film-maker accomplishes in a similar manner with cinematic precision and efficiency:

> A low-angle shot of a rose, for example, conveys a sense that the flower is for some reason dominant, overpowering, because we consciously or unconsciously compare it with, say, an overhead shot of a rose, which would diminish its importance. (Monaco 1981: 132–133)

But there is an important difference: in film, syntagmatic connotation is much more essential in creating meaning than in literature. The meanings adhere to shots because they are compared with other actual shots that precede or follow them. Editing and montage resulting in the quick succession of shots in sequences of ever changing juxtapositions, contrasts, and perspectives are the film-maker's most 'cinematic' tools.

Both paradigmatic and syntagmatic connotations are based on conscious and subconscious comparison. The viewers of a film set in a different culture can continuously compare the actual images with potential ones from their own culture and thus establish paradigmatic connotation; or they can continuously compare the actual shots with the film and thus establish syntagmatic connotation. In both respects, viewers verbalizing these comparisons will be describing contrasts, both intercultural and intracultural. The conciseness of a film's statements about the cultures it represents is due to the concentration of contrasts it contains, contrast being the guiding principle in editing, as the major device to intensify the conflicts and dramatize the tensions inherent in the story. Now, a considerable portion of the major and minor conflicts and tensions propelling a feature film's actions and characters has a (sub-)cultural aspect: characters can usually be categorized into different groups – ethnic, social, national, regional, age and gender groups, for example; each with its own culture. If the cultural aspects of a film are important, they will to some extent influence the film-maker's decisions as to what to shoot, how to shoot (the paradigmatic) and how to present the shots (the syntagmatic). The filmic codes will thus help define and illuminate cultural codes.

An approach to understanding different cultures through film will therefore include the following essentials:

- a descriptive effort to realize and to communicate cultural film content,
- an examination of paradigmatic and syntagmatic connotation focusing on comparison and contrast,
- the awareness that in life as in film understanding another culture is a process rather than an end, although a film's statements about another culture are 'made' and can therefore be 'grasped' better than life's statements.

In the two films analysed here the difference of cultures is the main theme. Differences between English working class and middle class cultures are the theme of *Educating Rita*; in *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the traditional English theme of social class is interwoven with the theme of ethnicity, of intercultural differences between Pakistani and British cultures. At the same time, both films suggest not only workable definitions of the (inter-)cultural process but also strategies for dealing with cultural differences.

I use *Educating Rita* to introduce my German students not only to the class structure of British society but also to the definition of culture and descriptions of differences between cultures that the film contains. The students begin to realize that a conflict within a culture may actually constitute that culture to some extent, and that the mechanisms observable in intracultural conflicts are very similar to those in ethnic conflicts. This is useful knowledge and a good preparation for the more complex analysis of cultural process in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. The fact that, in both films, a subject laden with grim self-opinionatedness or determined principledness, is presented as a social, or socio-ethnic, comedy comes as a surprise – and almost a relief – to German students.

I have taught these films in two different kinds of courses addressed to different groups of students: one group consisted of first and second year students of English (prospective teachers many of them) aged between 18 and 25. The other group were 'Oberstufen' (Sixth form/Grade 12) students in a general education English class. Both groups included students who (or whose parents) had immigrated to Germany from Turkey. To stimulate awareness and discussion I asked them to write journals containing impressions of, questions about, and interpretations of, the films shown in class. I am using this material and my own notes as my main source. I had to refrain from using more academic sources (although I sometimes felt tempted to juxtapose these and my classroom 'sources') because I wanted to use a language that could be used by other German teachers in their classroom discussions. Those interested in what some critics have said I would like to refer to my article on *My Beautiful Laundrette* (cf. Schüren: 1994).

2. Conceptions and Misconceptions about Culture

To prepare the class for the viewing of the feature films I found it necessary first to discuss the students' own conceptions of culture and cultural difference. What follows is a very brief summary of our attempt at spotting some of the common misconceptions about culture, differences between cultures, understanding cultures and, in particular, about the interpretation of filmic representations of other cultures.

Fragmentation. Linguistic and cultural obstacles make it, at a first viewing of a film, almost impossible for German students to recognize many of the (paradigmatic) elements of a foreign culture that are presentend to them. But despite a highly

fragmentary input the students usually feel they have understood enough of what they have seen. This is an observation that one can often make when showing an English film to German students: there is such a wide scope of visual and verbal information that some meaning can be constructed from just a fraction of it; moreover, many students have learnt from an early age to piece together fragments, zapping their way through several TV-programmes simultaneously. Much of the information in a film from a foreign culture is considered as forming a kind of exotic backdrop that does not require particular attention because 'it is just there'. Recognizing the universally familiar – boy meets girl, A kills B – or the vaguely stereotypical – like an eccentric old lady reminiscent of Miss Marple – seems to be sufficient to create 'understanding'.

Individualisation. The problem of understanding is often conveniently reduced to a problem of perception. Since one can perceive only segments of reality, the relativistic conclusion is that reality consists of segments; the way reality is represented and consumed on TV strengthens this relativistic attitude. Students are always quick to agree that 'one should not generalise' (still the most popular logical fallacy): someone, they say, has perceived certain modes of behaviour somewhere in England, someone else other modes elsewhere in England, and since observers belong to different subcultures and have different lifestyles at home, they will perceive different 'realities' as 'typical' of the foreign culture. Strictly speaking, students may say, there are only individual cases since every human being is unique and has the right to be perceived as such. Exploring, and distinguishing between, what is unique in a person and what has to be attributed to the impact of a more comprehensive social or cultural group identity is thus a very common problem in understanding another culture. A character played by a famous film star is hardly ever perceived as a member of a group.

Counterstereotyping. One of the most common strategies to evade nicer distinctions in the discussion of group identity may become apparent when, for instance, a non-Turk makes a generalizing statement about Turkish culture. The statement will almost automatically be dismissed as 'stereotypical', especially if it is seen as implying a pejorative judgement. A Turk will then tell us the 'truth' about his culture, making another generalising statement. I like to call this strategy 'counterstereotyping', because it is simply used to replace, or to offset, one stereotype by another instead of analysing the extent to which it contains truth, or asking which more complex pattern of cultural tensions it neglects. Many films invite arguments about stereotyping since most of the parts are cast to meet (stereo-) typical expectations in the audience.

Lack of reciprocity. A Turk or an Englishman making generalising statements about 'his' country is hardly ever contradicted because it is taken for granted that 'he has seen it with his own eyes'. Paradoxically, statements by German natives as to what might be 'German reality' or 'typically German', are seldom accepted by the other German students although they are just as authentic. This lack of reciprocity can often be noted in comparisons, especially if parameters are not made

explicit or the comparison is disguised as a statement. Why, a student of Turkish extraction complained, do we always hear that a low level of education is responsible for xenophobia in Germany, and why does nobody ever draw parallels between this and the even lower level of education of most Turks and the possibility of xenophobia in Turkey where, theoretically, it should be much more rampant than in Germany? Why is 'hostility toward foreigners' in Germany discussed as if the Turks were merely the 'objects' or victims of a German problem, and not potential problem sharers in a reciprocal cultural process?

Static notions. Lack of reciprocity in perceiving and describing other cultures may also be responsible for a cliché common in popular and in academic discourse about European unity or multiculturalism: 'to preserve cultural identity'. The proponents of this static conception of culture usually demand the preservation or protection of the cultural identity immigrants or their parents have brought with them. Paradoxically, the Germans among these proponents themselves will often disclaim any allegiance to, or even the existence of, a German identity. The notion that cultural identity (or non-identity) is something static is also cherished by those who demand that immigrants should adopt the German way of life. To prepare students for discussing differences between cultures they should be made to realize that 'identity' is something dynamic.

In this context I draw the students' attention to the blurb of a video about the British way of life that I use to introduce the discussion. The text uses a good image to explain culture: "[...] the rich kaleidoscope that makes up the characters and characteristics of us all." (*The Best of British Cinema* 1989) The loose pieces of coloured glass in the kaleidoscope do indeed always remain identical, although they show many different patterns and geometric figures – but only if the tube does not remain static but is shaken. These variant patterns are shaped by fixed mirrors. Stable and unstable elements *together* generate an image, a variety of images, if the 'system' of the kaleidoscope is given dynamic impulses from outside.

Discourse about cultural patterns functions in a similar way: questions like the one used to start our classroom discussion, or fixed thought patterns like 'preserving one's identity', must be turned and rotated to generate the new distinctions and perspectives and the more accurate descriptions and questions that will lead to a more sophisticated and differentiating approach to other cultures. Similarly, the language of the film-maker, through the manner of his shooting, editing and through montage, creates new dynamic patterns, contrasts, and perspectives from individual shots and pieces of footage.

The 'easy to understand'-fallacy. Turning the kaleidoscope of life and rearranging life's bits and pieces into meaningful and beautiful patterns is what writers of fiction and makers of feature films do, and this is why their works are the best source of knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures. Above all, they depict all the many little things and eccentricities that constitute a way of life. But while a novel will spread out before our inner eye its characters and settings slowly and gradually (and usually also directly attach to them significance and judgments), a

film is quick, providing sounds, words, actions, settings etc. simultaneously: a high intensity representation of life, often wrapped in the kind of music we use in our real lives. It is for this reason that many of the 'little things' that make up foreign culture pass unnoticed: we can still easily pick out enough familiar elements and combine them to construe for ourselves a satisfactory 'understanding'.

Christian Metz wrote the much-quoted sentence: "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand." (Quoted in Monaco 1981: 130) A film like *The Tin Drum* gives an American moviegoer the feeling he has understood the film; his satisfaction may weaken his need for further explanation and interpretation. Most of the film's cultural background and detail becomes a mere exotic backdrop without any particular significance. If we want to understand more of it, we will have to describe it ourselves: and this is more difficult to do than reading the descriptions of setting in a novel.

The self-deception that we can understand film easily – fostered by constant TV-consumption – may well hinder students from seeing that the understanding of some films, and particularly quality films set in a foreign culture, requires a lot of close viewing. (A growing number of students do, on the other hand, report that they watch their favourite [cult] movies several times to discover more and more of its meaning.) Since many students are only too willing to suspend disbelief while watching a realistic film and to accept the world of its pictures as a real world, they find it difficult afterwards to change their mode of reception into an analytical one and to acknowledge that the film is a skilfully contrived re-construction of reality, that it has been 'made'. This is why when discussing the significance of characters, clothing or settings one gets banal or erroneous statements like: "Why significance? That's simply what it looks like in A.'s flat", or "And then A. leaves the picture" – as if a character was a person leading an existence outside of the film, and his action not the result of a well-considered camera position.

But in the cinema it is precisely this artificiality that brings out social and cultural detail and accentuates the 'typical' or the 'general' in a particular character or situation. The film-maker, in a sense, paraphrases the reality (s)he knows to emphasise his or her viewpoint and ideas. Achieving an understanding of such a complex, carefully interwoven structure is even more demanding when this structure contains material from a foreign culture. No wonder that it is the deciphering of such a sophisticated filmic paraphrase of 'strange lives', and not the film itself, that strikes many German students as 'artificial' and 'unnecessary'. Deciphering here implies, for instance, that characters and their arrangements are seen in terms of their more general cultural significance, and that they are categorized into groups with shared values and habits. Students who identify with a character (or the actor/actress who plays the role), will, of course, vehemently object to such a procedure.

3. *Educating Rita* (1983)

3.1 From Love Story to Social Comedy

After a first viewing of the film in class I mention that Willy Russell, the author of the script and the play it is based on, wanted "to write a love story" that could be understood "without lengthy analysis" (Russell 1985: 5). Most students agree that he has achieved this. They understand the film as the story of a love relationship, with many ups and downs, between two very different individuals, whose parts were very convincingly acted. Within Frank, they discern a conflict between his arrogance and detachment and his need for closeness and intimacy; and Rita's, the hairdresser's, thirst for knowledge and education they see in conflict with her emotional bonds with her family. These inner conflicts are sharpened through external circumstances well known from many other love stories: he is comfortably off, she is poor, she speaks 'slang' (that is what the students call it), he good English, she drinks beer, he wine and whisky. The reviews of the film I provided – an American (cf. Magill 1983) and a German one (cf. Rhode 1984) – confirm the view of the film as a typical love story: they describe Frank as a disillusioned eccentric whose marriage has failed, Rita as the luckless hairdresser, dying for enlightenment and oppressed by her 'macho husband'.

The British reviews, however, even the shortest ones in video-catalogues (cf. Pallot, Elliot) never fail to emphasise the non-individual, social origin of the protagonists' inner conflicts. They describe Rita as "a young working class girl" (Elliot 1990: 249) or "a working-class hairdresser" and the film as "a poignant if predictable take on the English class system" (Pallot 1995: 222). This corresponds with the author's own view: he describes Rita as "starving in her present social stratum", as someone who, like Russell himself, "moves into another social stratum", and he calls the play "political because it's discussing class in this country" (Russell 1985: 95–96).

Russell's characterization of *Educating Rita* as a love story comes from a preface written for a German school edition. When talking about his play with a British audience in mind, he emphasises the play's socio-cultural aspects. When speaking to German students, Russell seems to assume that the play will be more enjoyable to a non-British audience as a love story than as a drama about the tensions between working class and middle class cultures. I suspect he was quite sure that 'outsiders' would not be able to appreciate the class aspect of his play. In his film script, Russell intensifies this cultural aspect of his play. Differences between the social classes are drastically elaborated and visually enhanced: neighbourhoods, interiors and specimens of the two classes are juxtaposed and contrasted. Very little of this cultural information was mentioned in the journal entries of the students after the first viewing – they had *seen,* but not *understood.* The variety of contrasts, verbal and visual, increases the number of comic effects, most of them at the expense of Rita. Most of the students at first regarded the comedy elements as welcome and 'typically British', mere additions to an otherwise universal love story

that could happen anywhere. There was one student, however, who felt that there was more to the comedy, and that her classmates' laughs irritated her a little:

> They only see the funny or sentimental aspects of *Educating Rita*, because they can't imagine that strange feeling of disappointment someone may have only because he or she is aware of coming from a different environment, even if there is no intended arrogance or aggression on the part of the others. When we talked about the reviews of *Educating Rita* and briefly about *My Fair Lady* I found that many people find these plays funny or romantic. Well, it may be funny on film, but when I was living a life like that I didn't think it was.

This exceptional German student – exceptional in that she was fully aware of her working class roots – had, after ten minutes' viewing, predicted that Frank and Rita "would not live happily ever after", an ending which came unexpectedly to most students, who, accordingly, found it "disappointing" in a love story. Judith – the working class girl – had felt that the differences between Frank's and Rita's subcultures were more serious than they appeared to her classmates. There was an embarrassed silence after Judith had spoken – something that would not have occurred if they had merely read a passage from Willy Russell's biography making the same point.

The most significant dimension of the foreign culture portrayed in the film, of which the German students had been unaware, had become visible to them through the 'shock' of Judith's outburst. They only realized how serious class distinctions are in England when it was demonstrated to them that similar distinctions exist in Germany as well, although here they are taken as a thing of the past and as of so little significance that no contemporary writer would think of using them for a comedy. A deeper cultural understanding of the reality depicted in the British film had been reached through reciprocity, the comparative look at German reality.

As a result, the German students found it very much easier to describe what is 'British' or 'black' about the humour of this social comedy (for instance, when Rita shrinks back from attending Frank's dinner party), and why this humour can suddenly turn into bitter seriousness (when Frank and Rita later discuss her 'refusal' to attend). Much of the humour in the film has to do with both verbally and visually expressed contrasts like those in the scenes just referred to. I asked the students to describe other contrasts in the film and to think about their meaning, and that way the socio-cultural dimension of the film gradually emerged. It became clear, for instance, that Rita's identity problem caused by her Open-University education ("I'm a half-caste", Russell 1985: 45) is just as much due to her belonging to a social group very different from Frank's as to her individual personality. In fact, she only 'finds herself' when she crosses the cultural boundary; and the same can be said of Frank. The fact that a close relationship between the two develops is not the cause but the consequence of that boundary-crossing of each of them.

Another student, Sandra, describes their situation thus:

> Sometimes the connection between them seems like a love story, and one could only wish that they should find each other. But then this is impossible: both have to learn their lesson. They can only help themselves, and each other, out of their misery by watching each other and learning.

What there was to watch and to learn, the students now realized, could all be found in the film, if one looked for it and were able to 'read' the film's language.

3.2 Negotiating Differences between English Cultures

The love relationship between Rita and Frank is, in a sense, founded on a process of intercultural learning. It is not love at first sight that simply happens and finds its fulfilment in the course of (the film's) events, nor is it an anthropological constant, independent of cultural contexts and connecting human beings magically. In *Educating Rita*, the path towards love is a highly dynamic, highly differentiated succession of cultural contrasts generating sparks between the protagonists as well as in the film-viewer's mind as (s)he follows their encounters. The film achieves its tensions through cross-cutting: between Frank's study, where he and Rita are discussing her cultural boundary-crossing, and the noisy pub, where Rita has joined her beer-drinking family who are singing a song about happiness; or by counter-pointing contrasting subcultural contexts such as the wedding of Rita's sister and the fluctuating relationship of Frank with his girl-friend and of her with her boy-friend.

The presentation of cultural identity as a process entails the presentation of a wide array of elements constituting a culture and their interplay. Even without closer study of the English class system the students were able to see that the film so turns and shakes the kaleidoscope of British culture that new configurations are seen to replace the old ones; and they also realize that the coloured glass pieces of culture can take their new places in a changed pattern only if, correspondingly, other pieces can also change places and patterns.

This characteristic of the 'system' kaleidoscope is illustrated in a central scene in *Educating Rita*: Rita and Frank are discussing Rita's failure to attend Frank's dinner party, and Rita feels insulted and discriminated against several times by remarks meant by Frank as compliments. She vigorously objects to being characterized as "funny, delightful, charming", (mis-)interpreting "funny" – and ignoring the other epithets – as a disparaging description implying lack of seriousness: "I didn't want to come to your house just to play the court jester." (Russell 1985: 44) This touchiness is a result of an identity crisis: as Frank urges her to see herself as a unique individual ("be yourself"), she nevertheless feels somehow pushed back by him and his social stratum into the working-class-pub culture. "I don't want to be myself", she says, again (mis-)interpreting 'myself' as 'like the people I live with'. Frank is so much enraged about her assumption that he had intended to 'exhibit' her at the party (to "bring her in because she is good for a laugh") that he wants to terminate their relationship. What makes him change his mind is Rita's detailed

description of how she now felt a "freak" even in the working-class pub where she had fled from Frank's dinner party (all quotations from Russell 1985: 45).

Feeling, like Rita, discriminated against, although, from an objective point of view, there is no discrimination intended, is quite common among members of a social (or ethnic) minority of subculture. Although Frank, like anyone else in his social group, is only speaking and acting according to the rules within this group, this will lead to ill feeling – unless the conflict and its causes are 'negotiated', that is, made explicit and discussed in every little detail, between the parties involved. For Rita, education becomes a process of negotiating differences, and we can justly consider *Educating Rita* as a model of that process. Realistically, the ending of *Educating Rita* is not the end of her identity process: Rita has discovered that now she is in a position to continue developing on her own. But she also realises that now her 'home culture' has regained a new, more positive significance which has become a part of her new identity; she can now imagine going back "to her mother's" (Russell 1985: 72–73) and even having a baby.

4. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)

4.1 Defending Static Cultural Identities

The panorama of cultures in *My Beautiful Laundrette* is more comprehensive than that of *Educating Rita*. We can discern the following groups: the skinheads of the underclass, the working class represented by Johnny (whose clothes, language and behaviour make him distinct from his skinhead mates), the upper working class in the character of Rachel, the middle class in Omar's family, and the nouveau riche Thatcherite middle class represented by Nasser, Salem and his wife Cherry. The latter belong to the upper class in their native Pakistan. They, the first generation of immigrants, see themselves as Pakistanis although they differ greatly, in their adoption of Western lifestyles, from Nasser's wife Bilquis who has retained the role of the Indo-Pakistani housewife. In contrast, Omar and Tania, being second-generation immigrants, can, in their behaviour, hardly be distinguished from British middle class youths. Each of these characters is connected with members of at least two of the other subcultures represented in the film.

Asked to classify the film as one about homosexual lovers, or gangsters, or immigrants, most students said it was about immigrants – about groups of people rather than about individuals.There may be two reasons for this: in the first place, the central story of Johnny and Omar is closely interwoven with more fragmentary sub-stories of the minor characters. The script and, above all, the editing directly link each character with at least three others: the protagonists Omar and Johnny are not presentend as 'heroes' but as belonging or tied to various social and ethnic *groups*. Secondly, two of these groups, skinheads and Pakistanis, can, at first sight, be equated with skinheads and Turks in Germany. All the arguments familiar to most students from the debate about 'foreigners' and multiculturalism are in terms

of groups, not individuals. Consequently, the love story of Johnny and Omar was hardly mentioned in that first discussion, almost ignored in favour of the conflict between 'the' Englishmen and 'the' Pakistanis, or, to use the most common German terminology, the *Einheimische* (natives) and the *Ausländer* (foreigners).

The Turkish immigrants immediately showed solidarity with the film's Pakistanis, as orientals and co-religionists. Just as the classification of *Educating Rita* as a love story between individuals had deprived the first stage of the discussion of the complexity of the intracultural contrasts involved, the interpretation of *My Beautiful Laundrette* in terms of ethnic and religious allegiances and groups deprived it of the complexity of its contrasts between and within individuals. "Unfortunately [!] the film does not show any of Omar's Pakistani peers", writes an immigrant student, disappointed about the lack of Pakistani group identity in Omar, who "has betrayed his own culture and is so British that he has a British fascist as a friend". To another student, Omar is not a 'typical' Pakistani, and not a 'real' Muslim because he does not show any allegiance to his ethnic group. Kureishi himself, at the launching of his film in the U.S., had to face Pakistani activists claiming that "the movie was an insult to Islam: There were no Pakistani homosexuals or drug dealers" (Kureishi 1986a: 9). Though these activists disagreed sharply with the film's representation of their ethnic group, they were well aware of its 'destructive' message about ethnicity.

Another Turkish immigrant raised in Germany does not go as far as these Islamic critics. He distinguishes carefully between what a collective religious identity requires him to think, and what his own experience as an immigrant among immigrants in Germany may require him to ignore:

> Omar loves his friend Johnny, which is not typical of a Muslim immigrant. I know that this argument can be regarded as a stereotype: but when I think of a Muslim *I can't think* of him as queer. But the truth is that I have no idea about how many Muslim immigrants are queer or not. (my italics)

The fact that the immigrants in the film are not representative of their ethnic group and thus 'spoil' the homogeneous picture of this group, makes some students dismiss the film as 'unrealistic'. It is distorting, they say, to show rich Pakistani businessmen or alcoholics, since most of the Pakistanis in England are workers. That these students insist on a homogeneous, conflictless, 'good' identity of what they, being 'brothers in faith', regard as their own cultural group, almost automatically leads to an analogous perception of 'another side' just as homogeneous. In a longer essay by a Turkish student the "*skinheads* from the underclass" become "*many British people* who don't accept Omar", and, a page later, "*the people in Britain*, for whom Omar is different because of his dark skin, and that is why he will never be one of *them*" (my italics). In the classroom it is important to point out that such mechanisms of constructing and propagating homogeneous identities (against which the film sets its own mechanisms of deconstructing such identities) are culturally determined, and that they usually entail exclusion from a cultural group. And indeed, exclusion and its consequences is one of *My Beautiful Laundrette's*

major themes. In this respect, the film holds up a mirror to those critics who try to exclude its author or some of his characters. It does so literally: Böhner (1996: 275–289) closely analyses how the film makes use of mirrors and mirror image techniques of photography to undermine the notion of a static, exclusive identity.

Mostly through cinematic means, the film counteracts the strategy of making someone the 'passive' object of exclusion – by showing characters 'actively' excluding themselves.Tania, whom her father Nasser wants to marry her cousin Omar, at first excludes herself by rebelling against traditional norms. She refuses to marry Omar and thereby to strengthen the coherence of their extended family (Nasser has 'only' daughters) and the family business which Omar is to take over eventually. She does this because she is disappointed that her father, following the traditional pattern, will not give her a say in the business and wants to reduce her to being a mother and housewife. Full of spite she behaves 'decadently': she mocks Nasser's dirty-joke-cracking macho friends assembled in his bedroom by pressing her bare breasts against the room's window pane – without them noticing; she throws herself at Johnny, the British "nobody" (Kureishi 1986b: 100), while her parents are watching; and in front of Omar she rudely refuses to marry her cousin ("I'd rather drink my own urine", 101). Nasser wants her to get "out of his sight" (*ibid.*). Accordingly – and reminding the audience of the tragedy of Omar's English mother who had thrown herself under a train – Tania suddenly and mysteriously vanishes from behind a train rushing past the balcony of Papa's house, where he is standing with Nasser, as if she had spirited herself away and out of the film. Rachel, Nasser's mistress, on the other hand, becomes a victim of exclusion from the 'territory' of his life through a spell cast upon her by Nasser's wife Bilquis. The shingles she gets are her 'punishment' for her violating social, ethnic, and moral boundaries, and she accepts it as such. Omar, a 'mixed-race child' born and bred in England and ignorant of Urdu, is constantly being reproached by some of his Pakistani relatives for not really belonging to them. "Oh God, I'm so sick of hearing about these in-betweens", says Cherry, Salim's Karachi-born wife, who is a "mixed-race child" herself, "people should make up their minds where they are" (60). After Omar has been given the laundrette by Nasser his relatives constantly pressure him to fully adopt a Pakistani identity. His response to the threat of exclusion is a mixed one: he combines strategies of re-inclusion with those of self-exclusion. Again, the two-way mirror in the laundrette opening scene (cf. 83–84) visualizes this strategy of being outside and inside at the same time.

People like Cherry in the film, whose notion of cultural identity is a static one, will disapprove of *My Beautiful Laundrette* because it introduces too many disturbing elements into a unified image of their own or another ethnic group. For them, neither Omar nor Salim are true Pakistanis (or Muslims, for that matter), nor is Papa, nor Tania; these characters they like to call 'stereotypes', negatively drawn specimens of the 'unhappy mixed-race child', the 'ruthless oriental drug dealer', or 'the frustrated Third World intellectual'. The counter-question of how these characters should have been drawn to avoid stereotyping, exposes these critics' strategy as

what it really is: exclusion. Their alternatives are also stereotypes, only positive ones.

This strategy of counterstereotyping as a means of 'neutralising' undesired stereotypes is particularly common in film criticism for an obvious reason: film actors are usually not cast for their individual qualities but for the 'types' they represent. This makes it easy for critics to label characters as stereotypes, especially if they ignore what many film-makers successfully strive to add to these typical images through a united effort of author, actor, director and editor: an impression of a character's uniqueness that is strong enough to counterbalance his or her typicality and thus creates the particular aesthetic tension that distinguishes a good film from a bad one.

Behind the helpless exchange of allegations of stereotyping between critics there is often a genuine wish to improve intra- and intercultural understanding. They hope to achieve this by ignoring differences and bringing out what cultures have in common. The film demonstrates how this is done: Nasser ignores Omar's homosexuality, although he is unmistakably confronted with it in the back-room of the laundrette. Unflustered, he pursues his marriage plans, convinced that Omar will eventually accept the arrangement and follow tradition – at least outwardly. Nasser also ignores the conflict arising for his daughter from the tradition of arranged marriage, just as he believes he can ignore the dangers of his romantic cross-cultural love affair with Rachel. But he keeps conjuring up values common to Pakistani and British culture: he wants to prove his charity by using his wealth to help the poor and the outcast, "the dead-beat children" of Thatcherism like Johnny (Kureishi 1986b: 55), and he keeps asserting "that we are professional businessmen. Not professional Pakistanis. There is no race question in the new enterprise culture" (82). Significantly, in the end it is Nasser who fails, as a father, a lover, and a businessman; Tania reminds him that now Salim, the male and cultural chauvinist, "owns" everything: "our education, your businesses, Rachel's stockings" (101).

4.2 Developing Dynamic Cultural Identities

Kureishi's most obvious principle in showing more succesful ways to intercultural understanding seems to be reciprocity, the candid acknowledgement of differences and similarities. Just as exclusion is counteracted by self-exclusion, static (counter-) stereotyping is counteracted by dynamic 'kaleidoscoping'.

A collection of statements made by the film's Pakistanis about England and Englishmen may illustrate this. Kureishi questions the notion of homogeneous collective identities, especially the British notion of the 'Paki' and the smug self-image of 'official Paki-dom'. So it is that we hear the film's Pakistanis talk about England as "this damned country which we hate and love", a country, where "the racist Englishman" lives, a "cold" and even "not human" being, with "lads" as a subspecies who are "filthy", "ignorant", and even "shit" (Kureishi 1986b: 57, 61, 63, 93, 102). Pakistan is "the country sodomized by religion", where, in ironic

contrast to "this silly little island" (England), there is "every day [...] bridge, booze and VCR" (60, 107). Here the immigrants are drawn neither as innocent victims nor as 'typical' representatives of their culture but as individuals in the middle of a process of identity change full of contradictions and apparent inconsistencies. On the British side, Johnny, the protagonist, is shown as an individual involved in the same process, whereas the other Englishmen – Nasser's English friends, his mistress, the skinheads, and, in particular, the crowd in the laundrette – significantly represent the diversity of English culture – the very feature of 'Western' cultures that strikes many 'Eastern' observers as 'decadent'. And indeed, the scene of the laundrette opening is conceived as a kaleidoscopic picture of the new British culture, where, to the sound of a Viennese waltz (danced to by Nasser and Rachel), diversity is celebrated in a variety of explicit sexual, social, and intercultural contrasts and encounters.

The students find this way of dealing with rigid notions and (auto-)stereotypes refreshing:

> The clash of cultures is described honestly and I like the two main characters, because they do not give up, though there are compulsions from both sides. Racial discrimination on both sides is a striking feature throughout the film.

The fact that the film challenges some ingrained ways of talking and thinking about immigrants, and that there is reciprocity and differentiation in the perception of cultural groups, may have contributed to the film becoming the first 'cult movie' about culture.

At the fringe of the laundrette opening, in the back room, Johnny and Omar are celebrating their first success in renovating and cleaning up both a business and their respective identities. In contrast to Nasser, the two young people do not fail, or rather, they only *almost* fail, again and again. They do not share the social or ethnic 'camp thinking' of their respective groups. Omar knows that the threats of exclusion made against him from both cultural sides will not endanger him, if he succeeds in weaving his own identity pattern from the strands of different cultures. After he has been threatened by the Pakistani side ("too much white blood", "worthless", Kureishi 1986b: 69) and from the British side ("Get back to the jungle, wogboy", *ibid.*), he energetically pushes ahead with designing a way of life he and Johnny can both subscribe to, disregarding social class, gender roles and the forces of collective ethnic and cultural identities.

Omar is not willing to accept that identities cannot change. When his father dissuades him from renewing his childhood friendship with Johnny, because Johnny had, as an adolescent, "dressed as a fascist with a quarter inch of hair" (65) shouting "Immigrants out" (84), Omar refuses to believe that Johnny will remain a fascist for life. For Papa, embittered by his failure to establish himself as a left-wing journalist in Thatcher's England, Johnny represents 'them', 'the' racist Englishmen: "He [Johnny] went too far. *They* hate us in England." (66; my italics) To Omar, Johnny's former way of dressing and behaving does not express a permanent identity – Omar

feels that there are two more powerful elements of Johnny's identity: his working class virtues ("they help out and get on and cover up, whatever the need may be"; Dahrendorf 1982: 29), and his loyalty as a friend and lover.

The film impressively visualises the two interrelated notions that, to create cultural understanding, differences should be 'dramatized' and identity be described as 'dynamic'. As the car with Omar at the wheel and Salim and his wife in the back seat is held up by skinheads at the traffic lights, two perverted group identities are juxtaposed: that of the underdogs of the working class in their Doc Marten boots grotesquely squashing their faces and naked backsides against the windscreen, and that of two members of a racist, aggressive Pakistani enterprise class, whose faces, distorted by fear and anger, are shown in a close-up. This moment of extreme contrast marks the birth of a new identity of an as yet very small 'group' that later, in the laundrette back room 'niche' of society, will begin to define its own norms and values. During the incident at the traffic lights Johnny stands aside, "not really part of the car-climbing and banging" (Kureishi 1986b: 64), his blond hair and well-worn donkey jacket strangely spotlit, and Omar, leaving his compatriots in the Rolls Royce, "impulsively, unafraid" (*ibid.*), in a dark business suit, is walking towards him – and he walks and walks, taking much more time to reach Johnny than he would have needed in real life.

From then on we can watch their new 'niche' culture developing: they both 'negotiate' their own values with those of the 'old' cultures involved: Johnny protects Omar from arranged marriage, paternal pressure, and Salim's monopoly of violence in his family; Omar makes Johnny fight skinhead violence and even save Salim from it, and he protects him from being "swallowed up like a little kebab" by his family (104). All the scenes in which Johnny and Omar are alone together are characterized by a dynamic polarity propelling the process of their 'niche' culture (and of the viewers' development of cultural awareness). In the final scene, Johnny's wish to go back is ignored by Omar in his own, 'beautiful' way; he washes Johnny, just as he washes his father's underwear, his uncle's car, and finally, the laundry of the people in the laundrette. The scene in the washroom of the laundrette is reminiscent of a ritual ablution: the blood of racist violence is washed off, bodies are purified, bad feelings are purged from souls. This last scene of the film in the back of the laundrette (where Omar and Johnny had started the common project with "vigorous lovemaking" [85] and champagne) again illustrates the principle of understanding through reciprocity essential to the re-construction of cultural identities: While the two, stripped to the waist, are washing and splashing each other, the contrast of their skin colours which normally would have been very conspicuous here, has been smoothed by the effect of lighting.

Still one would hesitate to call the ending of *My Beautiful Laundrette* a happy one. Omar and Johnny are only at the beginning of a process of developing their own little subculture. Omar's father has failed owing to what he felt was rejection in a country of which he had had too idealistic a picture when he immigrated: "Oh dear, the working class are such a great disappointment to me", he says to Johnny

(94). His brother Nasser, also belonging to the first generation of immigrants, fails, too; wanting, in his own life, to combine western, 'romantic' love and oriental, 'arranged' love, has ended up without both. Tania, of the second generation of immigrants, and feeling rejected by both Omar and Johnny, chooses complete separation from her family and vanishes into an uncertain future. Against the background of such sad disintegration, the relative success of Omar's and Johnny's transcultural, homosexual partnership does indeed stand out.

4.3 How Realistic Is It?

To many critics, and some skeptical students in my class, this success seems unconvincing and unrealistic. "It is more like in a fairy tale, I can't believe that Johnny suddenly likes immigrants just because he has a Pakistani friend", said a student after a first viewing of the film.

Thus the film itself deliberately evokes the question of how realistic it is. This question is of great significance in cross-cultural discourse, in particular between Eastern and Western cultures. There is quite often disagreement as to what can, or should, be regarded as true reality, and as to what function the representation of reality should have. What 'reality' or 'realistic' means is again culturally determined, and the film makes exactly that point.

If one asks young people whether they believe in horoscopes, magic or the evil eye, they will say no. They will not deny, however, that a certain percentage of the German population, believes in these things. In *My Beautiful Laundrette,* they are confronted with a case of magic – and with a way of presenting it – that makes it more difficult for them to respond to it, as their descriptions show. It would be stereotypical simply to explain it as due to the 'irrationalism' of oriental cultures; and it would mean relativising obvious differences to say that such things happen everywhere in the world.

The belief in astrology and religious magic is an essential feature of the cultures in the Indian subcontinent. In *My Beautiful Laundrette* magic is presented as just as real as Nasser's business practices. We actually see Nasser's wife Bilquis, in an almost pastoral garden setting, surrounded by her daughters, concocting a "magical potion" from leaves, dog urine, half a goldfish, and the crushed eyeball of a newt (Kureishi 1986b: 94–95). The magic works: Rachel's furniture shakes, she gets the shingles, and she therefore decides to end her love affair with Bilquis' husband. The film's audience is actually shown Rachel's "blotched, marked stomach" accepted by her as Bilquis' work (105), and as a just punishment. Why this intrusion of the unreal, supernatural, into an otherwise quite realistic picture? the students asked. The question misses the point. The 'unreal', in the context of an as yet not westernized culture – represented by the traditional Pakistani housewife who has just decided to go back to her home country – *is* a reality, and it does have the power even to penetrate the boundary lines between cultures. The film confronts the

western audience with the *fact* that reality may be different in a different culture, that the unreal can be real elsewhere.

Another victim of the reality of magic is Nasser, over whose head Bilquis has emptied the magic potion. As he stands, in the last but one scene of the film, with his brother on the balcony of the latter's flat right above the railway tracks, all of a sudden he sees his daughter Tania on the platform opposite – and just as suddenly she has disappeared after the passing of a train. But only Nasser under the spell of Bilquis – and, of course, the audience – actually perceives that mirage; Papa has turned his head in another direction, he does not react to his brother's desperate outcry: "Tania, where the hell are you going?" (*My Beautiful Laundrette*; Nasser's outcry is not in the film script, see next quotation below). This could also be taken as an ironic filmic reminder of how one might miss an important point if one does not describe and communicate what one sees, and what one does not, on the screen as well as in real life.

Those who look upon these scenes as fairy-tale elements introduced to make the audience realize that the whole story is little more than a modern tale of the Arabian Nights, too good to be considered as true in view of grim British reality – those critics refuse to change their Eurocentric perspective for a while and thus eschew discussing the intercultural conflicts between different concepts of reality that abound in political and human rights debates around the world. This attitude makes the film not only easier to understand but also easier to explain. But it is also just what the makers of the film wanted to avoid.

In the film script Kureishi describes Tania's disappearance realistically:

> A train approaching, rushing towards Nasser. Suddenly it is passing him and for a moment, if this is technically possible, he sees Tania sitting reading in the train, her bag beside her. He cries out, but he is drowned out by the train. If it is not possible for him to see her, then we go into the train with her and perhaps from her POV [point of view] in the train look at the balcony, the two figures, at the back view of the flat passing by. (Kureishi 1986b: 109)

When the film was being shot, Kureishi must have realized that adding another unrealistic scene to that about the magic potion was a good opportunity to say "difficult, challenging things [...] about contemporary life" (41–42). Thus the film is just as difficult to explain as any other work of art, and as life in a world where cultural systems interpenetrate.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that films, because they are easy to understand, can nevertheless lure us into a world of cultural differences and 'faultlines' that is very difficult to explain. To a much greater extent than fiction, feature films require that to understand them we should describe and explain, in great detail, characters and settings, actions and

relationships. As James Monaco points out, syntagmatic and paradigmatic connotations attach to even the simplest statement in film:

> There is an old joke that illustrates the point: two philosophers meet; one says "Good Morning!" The other smiles in recognition, then walks on frowning and thinking to himself: "I wonder what he meant by that?" The question is a joke when spoken language is the subject; it is, however, a perfectly legitimate question to ask of any statement in film. (Monaco 1981: 133)

This will remind us that books on translation often use forms of greetings to illustrate the 'little' differences between and within cultures that seem insignificant but, taken together, are responsible for the 'culture shock' befalling those who have been exposed to close and prolonged contact with another culture. It is the concentration of such little visual, verbal, and musical connotations in film that is often the main factor in creating its strong emotional impact: e.g. the pub and wedding scenes in *Educating Rita* or the laundrette opening in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. The psychological distance between initial emotional involvement and the detached attitude necessary to understanding is much greater with respect to film than to literature. Much of the pleasure of watching one's personal cult films for the umpteenth time is due to the process and the opportunity of discovering and creating more and more meaning – much of it, inevitably, cultural. Of course, most films do not make cultures their main theme in the same way the films discussed in this paper do; but most films do represent the cultures of their makers, both in content and style. To make students more observant of the various cultural influences shaping their minds through the medium of film, and to provide teachers with the material and the competence necessary to achieve this, is an aim that should be given more importance in the teaching of foreign languages and cultures.

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