Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne

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Zacharias, R. (2009). A Desire for the Real:: The Power of Film in *The Englishman's Boy*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne, 34*(2), 245–263.

A Desire for the Real: The Power of Film in *The Englishman's Boy*

Robert Zacharias

> Let us . . . be on our guard against the hallowed philosophers'
> myth of a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knower.' . . . All these
> concepts presuppose an eye such as no living being can imagine,
> an eye required to have no direction, to abrogate its active and
> interpretative powers.
>
> — Friedrich Nietzsche (255)

Midway through Guy Vanderhaeghe's award-winning novel *The Englishman's Boy* (1996), Damon Ira Chance, an infamous and reclusive Hollywood studio head, invites a hapless young Canadian screenwriter named Harry Vincent to his mansion for dinner. The year is 1923, and the filmmaker believes Americans must steel themselves for conflict; news of Lenin's revolution reverberates around the world, and Mussolini's blackshirts have just marched on Rome. Speaking of the power of cinema in a hushed voice over an after-dinner cigar, Chance admires Mussolini's use of film and announces that he intends to harness the new medium to rewrite the story of the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873 as a mythic history of the settling of the American west. The scene closes with the producer announcing that "the mind's highest struggle is to interpret the world" (110) and that since, as he claimed earlier, the "the new century [is] going to be a century governed by images" (106), he plans to interpret the world through film. He then declares that he's tired, and Harry stumbles out into the night.

There is a sense in which all of *The Englishman's Boy* revolves around this scene and the question it raises about the role media plays in our interpretation of the world. Critics have traced the ways the story of the massacre passes through Shorty McAdoo's oral narrative, through Harry's written versions, and on to Chance's film (entitled *Besieged*), debating whether the novel advocates for the primacy of orality or print but agreeing that it offers an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of film

as a medium. While it may be tempting to read the novel's representation of Chance as an ideologue producer as a warning against the abuse of film, rather than as a critique of the medium itself, I want to suggest that the portrayal of film in the novel as a whole is consistent with Chance's vision. Moreover, while Chance's faith in the revolutionary power of film may seem extreme to contemporary readers, it can be placed in the philosophical tradition of realist views of cinema, which hold that film is able to access an aspect of reality somehow unavailable to other media.[1] Stanley Cavell, for example, argues that film succeeds by addressing our deep desires to overcome our subjectivity — our awareness of how the world we experience on a daily basis is always already mediated by our status as beings-in-the-world. In this essay, I read *The Englishman's Boy* through Cavell's 1977 study *The World Viewed* to take a closer look at the ontological status of film in the novel, arguing that Vanderhaeghe suggests film attains its dangerously powerful persuasiveness by satisfying its viewers' unconscious desire for "the real." The question we are left with, however, is whether Vanderhaeghe is able to resist the very power he warns others against.

The Politics of Film in *The Englishman's Boy*

The driving force of *The Englishman's Boy*'s plot is Chance's attempt to (ab)use the story of Shorty's experience in the Cypress Hills Massacre, but it is the novel's "contest of technologies" (Wyile, *Speculative* 252) that has been of most interest to its critics.[2] Some, such as Daniela Janes, argue that within the novel's taxonomy of media, Shorty's personal participation in the events he recalls implicitly guarantees his story's authenticity; she suggests that orality is shown to be a nearly transparent medium, anchored to the events it relates through the metaphysics of presence. Others, including Herb Wyile and David Williams, suggest that Vanderhaeghe advocates for the primacy of print as an archival medium that allows for the documentation and sober reassessment of a past that would otherwise be lost with the death of its participants. As evidence, they point to Harry's seemingly verbatim transcription of Shorty's story, the novel's framing narrative that concludes with Strong Man recording his people's history by drawing pictures, and to the novel itself as written text representing Canada's past. Whether arguing for orality or print, however, all have agreed that the novel offers an unequivocal condemnation of the medium of film, although none

have taken an extensive look at the novel's representation of film as a dominant and dominating medium.[3]

There is little doubt about the ontological — and pedagogical — power of film within the novel: the setting is Hollywood, land of the film, where directors are referred to as "lords of the earth" making "more money than the President of the United States [and] maybe exerting more influence" (135). According to Chance, it is the filmmakers who have "given America to Americans" (18), and "the new century [is] going to be governed by images" (106). In explaining his faith in the power of film, Chance tells Harry of his first experience in the nickelodeon, where he discovered how audiences can be completely captivated and ultimately controlled by the new medium. Chance describes the audience as being "mesmerized," recalling that all semblance of individuality was lost as the crowd responded "in a single voice," laughing and crying on command, becoming a "great beast" that was "mindful of nothing but the flickering on the bed sheets nailed to the wall" (105). The lesson, learned well by Chance, is that the cinematic audience is overwhelmed by the medium. Arguing that "images take root in your mind . . . [and] they can't be obliterated, can't be scratched out" (107), he calls the cinema "the biggest night school any teacher ever dreamed of" (107). Film's power of persuasion is such that Chance unapologetically connects the cinema to fascism, openly admiring how Mussolini "paraded his Blackshirts through the city, before the cameras, so they could be paraded over and over again, as many times as necessary . . . burning the black shirt and the silver death's head into every Italian's brain" (109).[4] Aesthetics and politics blur together throughout, but what is interesting for my purposes here is less the novel's explicit commentary on early twentieth-century American politics — which seems to want to present Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* as an American *Triumph of the Will*, with all its attendant implications — than its implicit critique of film as a medium that controls viewers so completely it is *as if* it were a fascist dictator. At the novel's close, Harry directly connects film to the fascist leaders, saying the newsreels that precede films show "Hitler ranting like some demented Charlie Chaplin; Mussolini posturing on a balcony like some vain, second-rate Latin screen star" (325). In fact, as David Williams points out, Harry seems to blame film "for having *produced* Hitler and Mussolini" (189) — a claim that is, for Williams, the height of absurdity. "To blame fascism on the movies because of

Chance's *Besieged* makes about as much sense as to blame fascism on print because of Hitler's *Mein Kampf,*" he argues (189). Others, however, are not so sure.

If the idea that cinema's representation of reality might have dangerous political implications may not make sense within the overarching narrative of Williams's study — that Canadian authors are tracing (and we as readers ought to be embracing) a society-wide transition from oral culture, through print, film, and now into cyberspace — Janes notes that "*because of its very illusory nature*, film is conceptualized in the novel as a potential tool in the creation of a propagandistic national history" (96; emphasis added). Similarly, Herb Wyile warns that "the novel inscribe[s] a metafictional *scepticism about the filmic machinery* behind the Hollywood Western" (*Speculative* 247; emphasis added). Both James and Wyile recognize that Vanderhaeghe's novel seems to express concerns not only with the abuse of film but also with the implications of the apparatus of film itself. If film is not to be understood as a politically and ethically neutral medium that simply transmits the viewpoint of the director, however, what is the nature of the critique levelled at film machinery? From where does the novel suggest film derives its overwhelming force?

Desire for the Real

In *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971)*,* the philosopher Stanley Cavell posits a reading of film that may help to explain the position of cinema in Vanderhaeghe's novel. Cavell argues that the central issue in all of modern philosophy has been our subject-ness, our status as beings-in-the-world, which implicates us in the creation of everything we see. By virtue of the inescapable presence of our selves, he reasons, our view of the world is always already mediated: "we do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self" (102). According to Cavell, the recognition of our own subjectivity creates a deep sense of "metaphysical isolation" (21) as we realize that the world we experience is simply an interpretation; more accurately, it is not *the* world at all but rather *a* world of our own creation, our own "private fantasy" (102). The point is not that there is no world existing independent of our fantasies; to the contrary, it is precisely that we know the world exists, and yet we recognize how our experience of it is forever shaped by our subjectivity. As a result, he argues, "the human wish

intensifying in the West since the Reformation" has been "to escape sub-jectivity" (21). Cavell goes on to identify the nineteenth century's fixation on realism as a manifestation of this desire for the "real" world (38). He concludes that attempts to escape subjectivity through traditional art were doomed to fail because all arts that involve a human agent in their production contain evidence of that human presence within their representations of the world, and thus inevitably reinscribe subjectivity even as they struggle to evade it.

And here, for Cavell, lies the secret to film's unique powers: eschewing auteur theories that would suggest the significance of films lies in their manifestation of the genius of the director-artist, *The World Viewed* argues that what is most ontologically significant about film is the apparatus of film itself. Film "overcame subjectivity," he insists, "by *automatism*, by removing the human agent from the task of production" (23). Since the audience is not a part of the reality projected upon the screen, and the film contains no obvious trace of the artist implicated in its production, the cinematic experience offers a projection of the world that appears to be free from the mediating factor of a human presence. "Movies seem more natural than reality," writes Cavell, "not because they are escapes into fantasy, but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is *already* drawn by fantasy" (102). According to Cavell, then, film's power lies in this ability to address the problem of our subject-ness and thereby satisfy our desire for the real. The point is not that film actually manages to overcome subjectivity — although, as William Rothman and Marian Keane point out, this is a common enough reading of Cavell's work (65) — but rather that the power of the camera comes from its provision of an image that *seems* pure, will-less, and timeless: it is the eye that Nietzsche declared impossible.

Recognizing that Chance's understanding of film appeals to an ontology similar to the one expressed in *The World Viewed* helps us to understand Chance's "mania for authenticity" during the filming of *Besieged*. Like Cavell, Chance sees the problem of subjectivity as lying at the heart of the human experience, claiming "the mind's highest struggle is to interpret the world" (110). And, like Cavell, Chance believes that film is able to interpret the world by accessing reality in a way that is unavailable to other media, that when "the lightning crackles in your mind . . . something profound, something original is born. You

see what is really there" (254).[5] Chance's claim that in film we "see what is really there" echoes Cavell's suggestion that photographs seem to present us not "with 'likenesses' [but] with the things themselves" (17). The meaning of what's "really there," of course, is subject to the whims of the filmmaker, but the point for Chance is that unlike other mediums that seek to *represent* reality with varying degrees of success, film *projects* a reality which viewers either accept or refuse. "There's no arguing with pictures," he tells Harry. "What's up there on the screen moves too fast to permit analysis or argument. . . . A moving picture is beyond thought. Like feeling, it simply *is*. The principle of a book is persuasion; the principle of a movie is revelation" (107).

Chance's argument is that the apparatus of film — the medium itself — changes the nature of the message being relayed. And yet while Chance declares himself a devotee of D.W. Griffith in believing that "the motion-picture camera would end conflicting interpretations of the past" because "all significant events would be recorded by movie cameras and film would offer irrefutable proof as to what had really happened" (17), he has no illusions of wanting to use film to actually record or document history. Indeed, Vanderhaeghe makes sure we see the irony in the claim that film will "end conflict" about the past, promptly noting that Griffith was the director of *The Birth of a Nation*, a controversial mythologizing of US history in which the Ku Klux Klan become the defenders of true (i.e., white) America during the Civil War. Moreover, Chance sees no contradiction between historical "proof" and ideology, even as he recognizes that what audiences want from film is reality. "The average American feels foolish when he enjoys a made-up story," he explains. "But entertain him with facts and you give him permission to enjoy himself without guilt. . . . Everybody wants the real thing, or thinks they do" (18-19). Accordingly, even as it becomes increasingly clear that his film will not accurately represent Shorty's story of his experience at the Cypress Hills Massacre, Chance "demands historical accuracy in every detail" of the setting, sparing no expense to ensure that his film includes nothing out of place or anachronistic (223).[6] Having no intention of fidelity to the historical record in *Besieged*, Chance's demands for historical accuracy are nothing but an attempt to fully capitalize on film's "revelation" of a world view — not to represent history as Shorty describes it, but to project a

new past that he believes is necessary for America to meet the political challenges of his time.

Importantly, the novel confirms Chance's beliefs about film by literalizing them to show how thoroughly film is able to penetrate and influence the "real" world: in Hollywood — that ideal location for an exploration of the liminal space between the worlds of film and fact — movie props become furniture for local restaurants (128), celebrities' houses are no different than foreign movie sets (11), and the Hays Office attempts to prohibit carnality both on and off screen (15). The actor Fatty Arbuckle's real-life sexual assault case has cowboys shooting at movie screens, and women rush to the front of theatres in outrage to attack his projected image (15). Chance suggests that film is able to powerfully influence our experience of the world, and the novel sets out to demonstrate this, showing how, as Marshal McLuhan's evocative pun has it, film "substitutes a 'reel' world for reality" (262). The actor Erich von Stroheim, for example, is unable to appear anywhere in public during wartime as a result of his portrayal of evil Prussians in films; his cinematic character overtakes his actual personality (105). Similarly, local cowboys resort to playing parodies of themselves on film (21); cowboys and their horses die attempting to simulate horse chases (65); and Shorty McAdoo, the legendary cowboy and ostensibly the subject of Chance's blockbuster film, cannot convince people that he is, in fact, *the* Shorty McAdoo (320). Even Harry is fired from his lone acting job for his inability to act like a tired cripple despite the fact that he is such a tired cripple that "acting is not required" (207). The "objective" world of cinema, it seems, threatens to overtake and supplant the subjective world of reality.

While Vanderhaeghe's novel illustrates Cavell's theory of film, it challenges Cavell's implicit conclusion that film is a politically neutral medium. If *The World Viewed* presents film's projection of reality as little more than profoundly entertaining escapism, *The Englishman's Boy* presents cinematic automatism as a seduction of the audience that leaves it deeply vulnerable to ideological attack.[7] In perhaps the novel's most compelling exploration of the audience's desire for the real, Harry is courted by an underage prostitute who is dressed to pass as a movie star, sexualizing the desire for realism in a cautionary portrait of film's power. Returning an updated version of the film script to Chance's mansion, Harry finds himself crashing a party Chance is throwing to celebrate

the progress of his great American movie. Through the windows of the mansion, Harry spies several of Hollywood's most celebrated actresses, and it takes some time before he realizes that they are actually prostitutes dressed up as film stars. "What about you, sport?" one of the girls calls to Harry as he realizes his mistake. "Looking for a little movie magic?" (246).

Chance's strongman, Fitz, "gives" Harry one of the girls, who pulls the screenwriter upstairs. Regardless of what a reader might think about the politics of prostitution, here it clearly operates as a synonym for "dirty" or "polluted," symbolizing film's seduction of its audience with a degraded approximation of reality: the young girl, who has been roughed up by Fritz, looks to be no more than fifteen years old, and she is terrified throughout. And yet even as we are shown Harry "nobly" refusing to sleep with her, Vanderhaeghe does not neglect to include the erotic details of their encounter, and pauses to describe the girl's seduction of Harry — how she "cup[s] her breasts and hold[s] them on timid display," "toy[s] with her nipples," guides Harry's hand under her dress, and so on (247-48). The effect of this carefully constructed scene is to cross victimization with titillation, placing the (implicitly male) reader in Harry's position to illustrate how film gains its power by offering a projection of reality that viewers desire, even against their will. "Everybody dreams of making love to a movie star," she says, and though Harry is aware of the lie, he finds it difficult to resist. The prostitue is dressed up as the actress Lillian Gish, and, undoubtedly allowing his desire for the movie star to colour his judgement, Harry is forced to admit that "in some respects it is true" (247). Indeed, the prostitute is positioned as a literal projection of film: "She succeeds as Miss Lillian Gish in a way," Harry explains, because "she has the wrought fragility of the original, the delicate bird-like bones, the cupid mouth, the large eyes, the fine tousled hair which now, with the light of a lamp behind her, blazes like a heaven-sent aura" (247). With the "light of the lamp behind her," the prostitute is a film character come to life.[8] In this passage, the desire for the real takes on its full voyeuristic meaning, and the message of Vanderhaeghe's novel is clear: indulgence in the illusion of objectivity offered by cinema is nothing but wilful ignorance and a dangerous retreat from the realities of our existence. Vanderhaeghe sexualizes the viewer's desire for reality, comparing our yearning to escape subjectivity to Harry's lust for Chance's hired women, and emphasising

the complicity of the viewer in succumbing to the power of the medium. Here, film is dangerous because it is simply too convincing, too influential; it stifles thought and bypasses debate by appealing to our deepest desires.

If the prostitute scene best illustrates the viewer's "desire," there is a second passage in the novel that better illustrates film's relationship with the "real." All of the fears the novel projects onto cinema are realized near its conclusion, on the opening night of Chance's film. Outside the theatre, Chance manipulates the crowds of people like a director with a group of extras, willing them into a chorus that chants the name of his film, *Besieged.* The passage is worth quoting at length because it portrays Chance's directorial/dictatorial ability to control the masses, and it is the culmination of Vanderhaeghe's warning about the fascistic elements of the cinema:

> A single voice rises in a shout from the back of the crowd. "Besieged!" Radiant pleasure, pride, happiness flood Chance's features. He straightens, grows taller. Yes, his body is saying, yes, yes, yes. . . . Now Chance's finger is marking time, more voices add to the deep, swelling chorus of "Besieged! Besieged! Besieged!" People shout it recklessly, happily, making a noise like the noise of empty barrels rolled in an empty street. "Besieged! Besieged!" (316-17)

The passage clearly repeats Chance's earlier experience in the nickelodeon in which he felt "the deep desire of the crowd to . . . bespeak itself in a single voice" (105). That Vanderhaeghe has shifted the paralleled scene outside the theatre is of utmost importance, for it confirms, once again, that the ability of film to control its audience members has spilled out into the "real world." The line between director and dictator blurs to the point that the title of the film, which is italicized everywhere else in the novel, is left meaningfully un-italicized in the crowd's chants. It is not italicized, of course, because the crowd is not referring to Chance's film at all; they are merely describing how Vanderhaeghe has presented their role as viewers before the power of cinema: "Besieged!"[9]

If the audience responds with a "mindless roar" (317) when the lines between "real life" and "reel life" dissolve, how is it that we find the apparent release from subjectivity offered by film's "projection of reality" such a potent relief? More than simply assuaging our "metaphysical isolation," Cavell appears to suggest an answer when he writes that "the reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it;

and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity) is a world past" (23). Here, under the veil of parenthesis, Cavell reveals that what is at stake in film is not only subjectivity but also the subject's responsibility. His disclaimer "through no fault of my subjectivity" highlights the fact that by mechanistically separating us from our own experience of the world, automatism absolves the viewer of accountability in the world. Notably, Cavell's shift from spatial considerations to temporal ones — "a world past" — is indicative of this move; by placing himself present at the past, he can participate in the action without having the opportunity (and, in turn, the responsibility) for agency within that world. "The proceedings do not have to make good the fact that I do nothing in the face of tragedy, or that I laugh at the follies of others," he explains. "In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured" (26). The audience is shy to get involved but eager to watch; this leads Cavell to conclude that "the ontological conditions of the motion picture reveal it as inherently pornographic" — a revelation that works well with the passage in which Harry is courted by the prostitute (45). Cavell goes on to insist that the voyeuristic experience of film is "not a wish for power over creation but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens" (40). Relieved of our subjectivity, then, we are relieved of the burden of our selves. While a desire to reach the world might appear to suggest a renewed sense of responsibility for occurrences in that world, here it has just the opposite effect: the real cost of objectivity, it seems, is accountability.

Which Real?
Accuracy, Authenticity, and the Representation of History

Cavell argues that the power of film comes from its ability to mechanically satisfy its viewers' desire for the real, but the question of what constitutes the "real" is the basis for a paradox that strikes at the heart of the construction of history in *The Englishman's Boy*. The "reality" that Cavell discusses has little, if anything, to do with the particularities of a given historical event; for him, the "projection of reality" (17) refers to the image of a world constructed automatically, and it is "real" inasmuch as the image projected is free from any obvious constraints of an artist's subjectivity. While painting or sculpture attempt to imitate things, film seems to present us "with the things themselves" (17). For

Harry, however, the "real" that is most immediately at stake in Chance's film is the "real history" of the Cypress Hills Massacre or, more properly, Shorty's version of that history. The confusion of these forms of the "real" is important because it explains how it can take Harry so excruciatingly long to realize that Chance has no intention of remaining faithful to the historical record or Shorty's story. It also explains how Chance can be completely obsessed with historical authenticity and yet complain when Harry writes the script "*exactly* as McAdoo described it," frustrated that Harry "assembles the facts like a stock boy stacking cans on shelf" (250). When Harry refuses to alter Shorty's story of the young Aboriginal girl who is raped and left to die in a building set on fire by the wolfers, Vanderhaeghe describes him as "clinging to the irrefutability of fact" (252); when he refuses Chance's demands to have her set the building afire on the grounds that it is historically inaccurate, the producer dismisses him as being "wilfully obtuse" (252). Harry mistakes Chance's calls for authenticity as a desire for historical accuracy, a confusion indicates their desires for different forms of the real.

This is not to say that the foregrounding of the "real" of historical authenticity "objectivized" by the mechanical apparatus of film succeeds in relativizing the "real" of the historical record in *The Englishman's Boy*. On the contrary, Chance's disregard for the specifics of Shorty's story is criticized heavily in the novel, with both Harry and Shorty taking their stands against Chance's project on the principle that its representations of the Aboriginal girl are historically inaccurate. And yet we know that if the reality projected by film can be questioned, so too can the reality represented by the historical record; if Chance's cinematic version of the historical Cypress Hills Massacre is obviously problematic, there seems to be no reason why Harry's version should not be questioned as well. As Williams writes, "If Chance's film version of history can be falsified, then why not Harry's written one?" (191). *And*, we can add, *why not Shorty's oral one?* Or, perhaps more to the point, *why not Vanderhaeghe's written one?* Shorty's story is presented to us as a genuine confession, just as we are clearly meant to take Harry's transcription of Shorty's tale to accurately represent history. Even if Harry is less than forthcoming about his motivations — and it is telling that Harry manages to convince Shorty to share his stories only by assuring him he plans to write a book about it rather than make a movie (83-85) — we are assured, time and again, that both Shorty and Harry are concerned with the

historical accuracy of the story. Vanderhaeghe goes to great lengths to reassure us that Harry is after the truth (see esp. 201-03); Harry records Shorty's story "word for word" (86) and Shorty double-checks to confirm its accuracy (204). Chance, of course, is a different story altogether. But if the filmmaker is criticized for his use of facts to shape a version of history for ideological purposes, there seems to be no clear distinction between Chance's project and Vanderhaeghe's own larger project in *The Englishman's Boy*. Indeed, if we measure both Chance's and Vanderhaeghe's versions of the Cypress Hills Massacre against the historical record, both are obviously revisions, and Vanderhaeghe may be the one making the larger additions. Shorty is not in the historical record at all, and, as Wyile catalogues, there are a number of places at which Vanderhaeghe's portrayal of the massacre contradicts the historical record, and rearranges key elements in order to better suit the novel's larger narrative — including the representation of the young Aboriginal girl, the very point on which the characters of the novel stake their claims of historical accuracy.[10] While Wyile may be right to conclude that "although one may argue that Vanderhaeghe is no less revisionist than Chance, shaping history to his particular ends, . . . it is hard to see the two representations as equally valid or equally problematic" ("Dances" 47), one wonders if this is not simply because of where our sympathies lie: we recoil at the imperialistic ends to which Chance's revision of history is employed, and we sympathize with Vanderhaeghe's project. *The Englishman's Boy* is unable to completely avoid the criticism lodged at Chance's film — that its re-presentation of the past alters history for ideological purposes. To counter that *The Englishman's Boy* is not meant to be conventional history is beside the point — neither is *Besieged*.

As one might expect, Vanderhaeghe is well aware of the way that historical fiction necessarily functions within the tension generated between the terms "historical" and "fiction," and he has addressed this question several times. In his keynote address to the 2005 Canadian Historical Association, for example, he raised the issue as his main point. Speaking to a room full of historians, Vanderhaeghe conceded that he often "settled on the illusion of authenticity" in his fiction, defending his decision to create the character of the young Aboriginal girl as being in consideration of "the constraints of space," and done to create a "stronger" moment. Yet he also revealed his ongoing discomfort with a genre that requires one to alter historical fact for aesthetic con-

cerns. After expressing great respect for historical research, he gestured toward the novel's illustration of the problems of historical "truth" and concluded that the lesson to be taken from his novel is to "beware of anyone who hands you history too neatly packaged."

While there are a number specific moments in the text that appear to offer such a warning against accepting representations of history on their own terms, there is also a sense in which the full effect of any historical novel, including this one, works against such self-awareness. It is true, for example, that *The Englishman's Boy* opens with a pair of self-conscious epigraphs acknowledging that while "life and reality are history," "History . . . is essentially a story." Some critics have read the novel as affirming this gesture, including Martin Kuester, who writes that Shorty's version of the events leading to the massacre is "embedded in yet another frame narrative [i.e., that of Fine Man and Broken Horn] telling the whole story from yet another perspective"; Kuester concludes that "the various versions thus relativize each other so that none of them can claim final authority" (291). However, I would question whether this is the message of the novel as a whole, or even of the framing narrative. While it is certainly true that Vanderhaeghe shows an alternate perspective on the settling of the American West by opening and closing the novel with Fine Man's story, it seems important to note that Fine Man's story is not telling another version of the same story at all. That is, although Fine Man and Broken Horn's theft of the wolfers' horses set the events in motion, they have nothing to do with the subsequent attack on the Assiniboine at Cypress Hills — either in the historical record or in the novel. In fact, Vanderhaeghe underscores this point by having Hardwick ride ahead to see if there is any evidence that this group of Assiniboine had been responsible for taking their horses (186) and showing him unable to find anything (195). Faithful to the historical record on this point, Vanderhaeghe has the battle break out not over the theft of the wolfers' horses but over the unrelated theft of George Hammond's horse, a man who was not a member of the wolfers' group. To argue that Fine Man's story relativizes Chance's and Shorty's versions of the massacre seems implicitly to accept that the Assiniboine somehow bear the blame for beginning the Cypress Hills Massacre, and to help justify the actions of the wolfers.

Even if the framing narrative, like the epigraphs, did acknowledge historiography and the narrative turn within history itself, they are

clearly contradicted by the thrust of the text, which returns to a very specific historical event in an effort to present a "corrected" or "more correct" version of a past threatened by a history of colonialism and racism that has been pressed into the service of two national mythologies. Although Vanderhaeghe makes metafictional gestures toward the uncertainty of historical authority, his novel ultimately requires its readers to have faith in historical accuracy for it to succeed as a narrative. As Janes astutely notes, "the reader, like Harry, must believe in the authenticity of Shorty's narrative in order to recognize the outrage that Chance's revision of it represents. The presence of 'truth' in one section thus draws attention to its absence in the other" (90). This is, I think, the central paradox of much contemporary historical metafiction that aims to recuperate forgotten histories: while they may appear to foreground the fallibility of history, such novels often nonetheless rely upon the appearance of infallibility for their rhetorical power and political efficacy. The paradox creates something of a game between authors and readers, in which authors employ a metanarrative that nominally concedes the relativity of all historical narratives and then promptly set out to convince readers of the veracity of one particular narration of history.

Although it may appear we have strayed some distance from the novel's commentary on the automatism of film, *The Englishman's Boy* manages to deflect questions about its own subjective representation of history by suggesting that print is an intrinsically "truer" medium than film. What is interesting, then, is that although the novel criticizes film for its approximation of reality that is paradoxically free from accountability to the historical record, it nonetheless does its best to imitate film's effects in print. Janes, for example, argues the novel is "based on a montage of shifting historical 'presents'" to conclude that the novel's "structure is filmic" (103). Similarly, Williams suggests that Harry's autobiographical sections "regularly employs the cinematic technique of cross-cutting, or parallel montage" (189), a mode of writing that theorists such as Alan Spiegel (176) and Keith Cohen (81) see as reflecting the influence of film on literary texts. Additionally, the novel's filmic use of doubled-narrative framing, with Fine Man's tale opening and closing the novel and Harry's Saskatoon experiences constituting the second and penultimate passages, can be understood as cinematic in structure. *In Film and Fiction*, Cohen argues that the use of narrative frames, such

as Vanderhaeghe's use of Fine Man's story, is symptomatic of the impact of cinema on literature. Such framing, he argues, is natural to the writer only because "the cinema had demonstrated more profoundly than ever before the physicality, the malleability of referential, or diegetic time" (121). Moreover, Vanderhaeghe splits the plot of the novel, temporally, to parallel the progression of the wolfers with the progression of Chance's film, a "simultaneous representation of two different events and the intermingling of distinct moments of time" that Cohen would argue is essentially a cinematic technique (123). Finally, as both Williams (190) and Wyile ("Dances" 30) point out, Vanderhaeghe relies heavily on third-person omniscient narration to suggest that Shorty's story is to be taken as historically accurate — a technique that, inasmuch as it offers an appearanceof objectivity by making us present to the actionwithout any acknowledgment of human mediation, might be considered print's approximation of the automatism of film.

Of course, referring to these literary techniques as cinematic is not to imply that they are either the direct consequence of film, or that their presence can be identified only in literature written after the invention of film, but rather that they are symptomatic of a means of representation that is emphasized or, as Spiegel writes, finds its "culmination" in film (xi).[11] The point is simply that Shorty, Harry, Chance, and Vanderhaeghe all mean their versions of the Cypress Hills Massacre to be authoritative and accurate in their own way, and for Vanderhaeghe, this means imitating filmic automatism in literary form. Those passages describing the massacre that we are to take as "historically accurate" — where Vanderhaeghe is at his most conventional as an author — illustrate the tendency so common to the nineteenth century: the striving for authenticity through realism that Cavell recognizes as a manifestation of the reader's desire for the real. Since the power of film comes by way of its "specific simultaneity of presence and absence" (Cavell 42) — by placing us present at a reality that is past — Vanderhaeghe's text can be read as employing literary techniques that find their fulfillment in the cinema, appropriating film's power while maintaining a critique of the medium.

Conclusion

Film as seduction, directors as dictators: if the power of film appears to be overestimated in *The Englishman's Boy*, Harry insists that this is only

because "it is difficult to remember how pictures used to speak to us" (228-29). Similarly, Cavell argues that we have "forgotten how mysterious" photographs are, and so we are inclined to ignore how different they are from other forms of representation (19). If Vanderhaeghe does stage a "contest of technologies" (Wyile, *Speculative* 252), it seems that by the end of the novel he has conceded that regardless of whether orality or print might be the most "authentic" or "authoritative" representation, film has become, and will continue to be, the dominant medium. Even when Chance is shot dead on the red carpet at his film's premiere — a moment we might be tempted to read as the definitive failure of film in the novel — the Christian imagery associated with Chance's death seems to promise that film will return, more powerful than ever. In a Christ-like moment of martyrdom to the medium, Chance spreads his arms "not in a surrender, but in an extravagant gesture of welcome" to the angry gunman (322). This image is completed when we are told, at the very moment he breathes his last, that "the canvas rips" (323), the film screen tearing in two like the curtain of the temple at Jesus's death (Matthew 27.51). Even Harry cannot escape the confines of the cinema: at the novel's close, we are told that the writer has spent the remainder of his days as the owner and operator of a movie theatre in Saskatoon (326). And in a final irony, *The Englishman's Boy* was recently released as an award-winning CBC miniseries, for which Vanderhaeghe himself wrote the screenplay.

Following Cavell's argument, *The Englishman's Boy* warns against the propagandistic nature of film. The novel suggests that as cinema "overcomes" subjectivity by destroying evidence of the artist in its representations of the world, it wields an overwhelming power that is inherently violent. Undermining its deeply conservative message, however, is the fact that the novel itself is unable to withstand the temptation it warns others against; in rewriting history for its own ends, the novel argues for the primacy of print even as it appropriates the subject-destroying techniques of the cinema. This, however, should hardly surprise us. If Cavell is correct, a historical novel can hardly do anything else. Ultimately, even a novel that self-consciously questions the historical record must satisfy its readers' desire for the real.

Author's Note

Notes

[1] Two of the most influential advocates of what Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen refer to as "realist views of cinema" (142) are Siegfried Kracauer (*Theory of Film* [1960]) and André Bazin (*What Is Cinema?* [1958-62]). As Rothman and Keane point out (albeit disapprovingly), it is common within film studies to consider Cavell "a Bazin acolyte" (Braudy 61).

[2] The Cypress Hills Massacre is a significant event in the history of Canadian nationalism, leading directly to the creation of the North West Mounted Police (later the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and solidifying a Canadian claim over what would become the Western provinces. The novel's commentary on Canadian and American nationalism has been well covered in articles by Alison Calder ("Unsettling the West") and Reinhold Kramer ("Nationalism, the West, and *The Englishman's Boy*"). Here it is most relevant to note that because of the way in which the novel so closely ties US westward expansionism to film as a medium — "The American destiny is *forward momentum*," Chance argues. "What the old frontiersman called westering. What the American spirit required was an art form of forward momentum . . . A *westering* art form! It had to wait for motion pictures" (108) — the novel's critique of US colonialism is passed on to film. It is as if film were not only the most appropriate expression of this "westering" movement but also somehow a part of the same ethos or, as David Williams writes, as if "Chance has discovered that the movie is nothing less than the national ideal of a motion-picture country" (187-88). Given Vanderhaeghe's larger critique of the Western genre and its ideological roots, the novel's implicit warning is that film takes over the mind just as the Americans took over the west: by force.

[3] My interest is strictly in the representation of film within Vanderhaeghe's novel and not with the ontology of film per se; that would require a different line of argument. In fact, it is worth noting that other than the passage in which Chance relates his early experience in the nickelodeon, nowhere in Vanderhaeghe's novel is a film even described, not even Chance's *Besieged*. This is also why I have chosen not to engage with the recent CBC film version of *The Englishman's Boy*, for which Vanderhaeghe wrote the screenplay.

[4] Later, Chance approvingly connects film with both Italian and German fascism (253), expressing his firm belief that American nationalism must use film to "convert all those who can be converted" and "damn the rest!" (253).

[5] Chance's claim that "you see what is really there" is made directly in reference to the process of speaking "from one heart to other hearts," but it is clear, within the larger context of the passage, that he is speaking about the function of film. His description of this process as "lightning crackles in your mind, pictures flash" (254) reminds us he is referring to the pictures, and it echoes his description of the use of film a page earlier: "Convert the strangers with lightning! . . . The lightning of pictures! American pictures!" (253).

[6] At a time when it was common to cast Mexicans or even Italians in Aboriginal roles, Chance insists on hiring "*real* Indians" (223; original emphasis). He also buys his own

herd of buffalo and scours the countryside for "Indian artifacts", orders buffalo pelts from Canada, and hires Mexican workmen to build an authentic adobe fort (223-25).

[7] Cavell is rarely understood as a philosopher of politics. A recent and notable exception is Andrew John Norris's collection *The Claim to the Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, which nearly completely ignores *The World Viewed.* The closest Cavell comes to recognizing any political dangers of film in his study is to admit that cinema has "tendencies toward the fascistic or populistic" because of its "natural attraction to crowds" (35), but he does so in a short parenthetical caveat to his claim that "because on film social role appears arbitrary or incidental, movies have an inherent tendency towards the democratic" (35).

[8] The nameless woman's approximation of Miss Gish is successful because there is no true original for her to emulate; although the prostitute takes on the actress's name —"My name is Miss Lillian Gish. How do you do?" she says to Harry (247) — she is actually playing/becoming the character Gish played in the 1919 film *Broken Blossoms*, Lucy Burrows. Gish, the actress, would hardly be at a party in her character's clothes with a "conspicuous" patch on her dress; however, unlike the other prostitutes at the party (who are dressed up as actresses in dinner gowns and are emulating the actresses rather the parts they have played), the prostitute courting Harry shows up in Lucy's ragged clothes (247). Like Gish, she is both playing and becoming Lucy, and the novel once again blurs the lines between the "reel" and the "real."

[9] It is tempting to read Chance's control over the crowds of people both inside and outside the theatre as evidence that, as Williams writes, "it is not film itself that is fascistic but a particular director's use of it" (184). However, within the symbolic economy of the novel, the one-dimensional Chance is better read as film's manifestation, or culmination, rather than its manipulator. A few examples from the many passages that show Chance as having become an automaton at the service of the medium will have to suffice: Chance spends his days watching so many films he has earned himself the nickname "the Hermit of Hollywood" (9), and the first time we see him view a film he is described as "a ceramic doll" with a face "as rigid as a granite Buddha's" (24). During his first meal with Harry he ingests his food "like a machine," his face "vapid and waxen," so completely still that Harry fears for his health (110). His habit of adjusting his glasses is described as "a gadget on an assembly line," and anyone he "meets on the sidewalk, man or woman, has to step aside or risk collision. He simply doesn't see them" (230). Left unchecked, the danger film holds for its viewers — overwhelming them to the point of controlling them — seems to extend to its directors.

[10] According to Gerald Friesen, there were five Aboriginal women raped, not one (134).

[11] The idea that films and novels can be spoken of in relation to each other with such causality, or even comparison, has been contested. See, for example, Kamilla Elliot (esp. 119-32), who polemically suggests that the debate has been characterized by "outworn, agenda-driven, and inadequate dogmas" (244).

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