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Film and Drama in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy*

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Canadian writer Guy Vanderhaeghe's novel *The Englishman's Boy* alternates between life on the wild frontier of Montana and Saskatchewan in the 1870s and the world of cinema in Hollywood in the 1920s in its exploration of how film and drama influence and construct the way we perceive history as it is expressed in fiction. Techniques from both genres are integrated into the novel, immersing readers in experiences from the characters' pasts while exposing some of the limitations of examining historical fiction through any one discourse of expression. Vanderhaeghe's novel suggests a longing to recreate rather than to represent historical experiences; it explores how a writer might bring a sense of the present moment, which is often conveyed so well in film and theater into the telling of the tale. The narrative addresses some of the challenges of writing self-reflexive fiction that investigates history, or what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction,[1] through its use of filmic and dramatic modes which are used to create a sense of immersion in two time periods that are removed from the reader's contemporary present.

The novel's two storylines alternatively focus on the life of a young, unnamed English immigrant who takes part in the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873;[2] and the life of Canadian screenwriter Harry Vincent who is hired by a Hollywood film producer, Damon Ira Chance, to write the quintessential

1 *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, 22-46.

2 On June 1, 1873, a group of American wolf hunters entered the valley of Cypress Hills between Montana and what later became known as Saskatchewan, seeking to recover their missing horses. A battle ensued between the Assiniboine people, the whiskey traders, the Métis, and the American wolf hunters, which resulted open fire upon the Assiniboine camp and deaths of approximately 20 Assiniboine people, along with one wolf hunter. Canadians, under British rule at the time, felt threatened by the free movement of the Americans across the border and the government experienced difficulties in extraditing and prosecuting several of the American wolf hunters involved (Goldring, n.p.).

American Western about cowboy Shorty McAdoo in the 1920s. The novel explores a range of reasons behind screen-writer Harry Vincent's choices to adapt stories from history (to protect his subjects, to create evocative or authentic representations of history), contrasted with producer Chance's desires to exploit his subjects for commercial gain, as well as constructing a national mythology that obscures the violent realities of the exploitation of land and indigenous people.

Form mimics content as the narrative itself features similar contrasts, sutures and splices; sharp cuts link seemingly distant events, creating historical connections and reverberations between seemingly disparate characters. This article will examine Vanderhaeghe's efforts to create sensory traces and a sense of presence in *The Englishman's Boy* through the use of dramatic and filmic modes, and evaluate how modes of expression can become incorporated into how we perceive stories and the larger world. Before looking at the novel in detail, it is useful to consider Laura U. Marks's analysis of how experimental filmmakers explore sensory traces behind print, speech, and images by focusing on bodies and memories surrounding important objects: "Some stories cannot be told through either official histories or individual remembrance [...] [These stories] begin to work at the limits of what can be thought, by referring to the memories of objects, the body, and the senses" (29). Marks suggests that "a mimetic and synesthetic relationship to the world underlies language and other sign systems" and is conveyed in cinema through translation into the image on the screen (214). She writes:

> While the mimetic traces of the world are harder to recognize in the demanding systems of signs that constitute the technological world […] they are still at work in our understanding of it. We are constantly recreating the world in our bodies, even as our representational systems become more abstract. Even when language is mediated through printed words, an invocatory trace of speech and its mimetic relationship to the world remains. (214)

She further proposes that new expressions are created by speaking between historical discourses, layering them, or breaking from conventions

in significant ways (28). She suggests that societal and political change is made through "a sort of a dance between sedimented, historical discourses and lines of flight, between containment and breaking free" (28). *The Englishman's Boy* follows Marks's dictum by delving into the internal histories of events, borrowing techniques from dramatic and film discourses to get readers to 'be there,' to have a sense of being present in the past, and experience moments from history in a palpable and tangible way. This can first be seen with an examination into the novel's use of dramatic techniques, connecting the Englishman's boy from the 1870s with Shorty McAdoo in Hollywood in the 1920s, and thereby allowing the reader to experience something somatic and meta-textual from both time periods, through ceremony, ritual and memories layered with historical traces.

Dramatic Discourse and Traces of Presence in the Novel

Vanderhaeghe develops a sense of presence in history by contrasting narrative modes that "show" and "describe" (*mimesis*) with dramatizations that endeavor, with varying levels of success, to enact moments (*methexis*). The novel dramatizes rituals of friendship and death, highlights the physical bodies of the characters and their theatrical presences and gestures, and invokes the ritualistic power originally associated with ceremonies. In the 1870s narrative, on the night before the Cypress Hills Massacre, the Englishman's boy and Ed Grace sense impending danger. The boy asks Grace if he will agree to a protective pact: "You stand by me – I'll stand by you" (169). The novel highlights a sense of ceremony as the men seal the pact with three handshakes:

> Nothing more was said [….] The boy felt a sense of occasion, his father had been a ceremonious man, gravely polite in a backwoods fashion. The kid laid aside his stick, and with his blanket hanging off his shoulders like a cape, shyly held out his hand. Grace shook it three times, emphatically (169).

A similar sense of ritual and ceremony resonates in Harry Vincent's narrative as the physicality of the characters tells its own non-verbal story at Miles's funeral. When Vincent, McAdoo, and Wylie bury Wylie's brother Miles, the men communicate to one another through body language that

marks the solemnity of the occasion and acknowledges the futility of words in the wake of Wylie's grief. Vincent writes: "We lower the coffin to the ground, take a quick blow [sic], and then McAdoo curtly bobs his head, the signal to stoop, lift, and scurry on" (143). The description of Miles' funeral provides physical details that bring a sensory immediacy to the scene: the taste of earth "souring the back of [Vincent's] throat" (148); and the body language of the men, "McAdoo stiff-backed in his black coat, Wylie with the burial ropes knotted in his hands, and me" (148). In contrast to how the story of Miles' burial is told, another death is mentioned during this scene with very few details of presence or physicality. As the men dig Miles' grave, McAdoo tells Vincent about Old Harp Lewis' Indian wife who cut off two of her own fingers when her husband died. The two storytelling modes are markedly different from one another and illustrate how effective physical and sensory details are in dramatizing a moment that brings a reader into its present time.

While the narration of the two stories differs greatly, they are connected; the story of Old Harp Lewis and his wife is a part of the internal history of Wylie's brother's funeral. McAdoo's memory is a part of his present, and part of the historical archeology of the moment. Vanderhaeghe writes: "So begins the interment of Miles Easton […] [w]ith this and a memory of the grief of that other stranger, of the funerary rites of a Crow woman, who cut a part of herself away to join whatever she had lost" (148). This scene in the novel shows circles of the past overlapping the present. Ceremonies and rituals awaken past stories and memories to create multi-dimensional presents with physical, emotional and historical depths.

The sense of the past in the present in the novel is developed not only through the dramatizations of rituals, but also through a close focus on the auras of objects which carry traces and connections to the objects' original contexts. Walter Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," describes the aura of an object as the unique and authentic cluster of associations that that brings one closer "spatially and humanly" to the object itself and to the context in which it was created (217). The compelling quality of an historical object and its aura is partly due to its ineffable distance from us; no matter how much we long to embrace it, it always remains, on some level, out of our time and beyond our grasp; and, yet it brings us stories from the past that cling to its material form. In

Vanderhaeghe's novel, the narrative lingers on certain bodies and objects as if searching for or mourning lost auras in the wake of technological discourses (print, film) that preclude tangible or physical connections to historical figures. The novel foregrounds particular bodies and objects as if traces of their historic materiality could be felt or sensed through the discourse of writing. Its focus on material presences is similar to that in the theater where a stage actor, as Benjamin observes, uses physicality and proximity to create a personal connection with the audience (222). Theater's sense of presence is approximated in the novel's search for the aura of bodies and objects, which gestures towards a physical and spiritual longing for the past that can never be truly re-captured.

Elements from dramatic discourses restore a sense of the physical in a textual medium. When studying certain objects in the novel in light of Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura – Shorty McAdoo's saddle, Harry Vincent's second-hand revolver and Damon Ira Chance's Indian artifacts – one may notice a range of provocative effects the objects have on the characters that possess them to unlock memories and release sensuous connections to the past. In "The Memory of Things," chapter two of *The Skin of the Film*, Marks explores how auratic objects, for example fetishes[3] or fossils,[4] "condense time within themselves" and how "in excavating them we expand outward in time" (77). Both do not "represent" that which is powerful, but have made actual physical contact with it (85). When such objects are emphasized in literature or film, as they are in Harry Vincent's narrative and in Chance's obsessive collecting of film props in *The Englishman's Boy*, they have the potential to engage the kind of sense memory that is often overlooked in a technologically-focused culture. An example of one such object is Shorty McAdoo's saddle which is more than

3 Benjamin's definition of fetish, explored in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," incorporates Marxist and psychological foundations. Benjamin believes "the fetish object encodes truths of collective life, and these truths can be discovered only through a shock that reaches the unconscious" (qtd. Marks 86). Marks provides a useful etymology of "fetish" based on the work of William Pietz which explores its colonial history and relevance within "intercultural encounters" (86).

4 Deleuze defines fossils as objects from the past that bring a kind of a "radioactive" presence to the present. Such objects are "strangely active fossils, radioactive, inexplicable in the present where they surface, and all the more harmful and autonomous. Not recollections but hallucinations" (113). Marks groups Benjamin's fetish and Deleuze's fossil together as recollection objects with "the power to witness history" (85). The fetish has an aura, and the fossil, a volatile, radioactive presence.

a talisman; it is Wylie's tangible connection to Shorty's past. It is also the means through which Vincent finally locates Shorty and makes a physical connection to the legendary cowboy.

Soon after Shorty agrees to sell his stories, Vincent procures a revolver as a means of eliciting "the right stories" (123). The next time the two of them meet, Shorty shares the one story that Vincent desires to hear most. Whether or not it is the materiality of the revolver that pulls Shorty back into his past, Vincent credits its power as a significant part of the process of accessing the memory.

Chance is obsessed with acquiring authentic items to be used as props in his film so as to "generate sensations in the body" (Bergson 179). He commissions his staff to "fan out across the country, chequebooks in hand, to dun private collectors, to seduce destitute reservation Indians who might be persuaded to part with Grandpa's medicine bundle, coup stick, or eagle war bonnet for a pittance" (215). The tactile connection to the objects emboldens Chance to re-write the story to his liking and thereby "retain […] some traces of the fetishist […] who, by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power" (Janes 96).[5] Chance gains a sense of empowerment by appropriating the stories.

Film Discourse in the Novel

Film is another discourse that influences the narrative structure of *The Englishman's Boy*, which translates a variety of techniques into the narrative, including panoramic shots, cross-cuts, close-ups, and flashbacks, some of which were pioneered by the legendary filmmaker D. W. Griffith (whom Chance reveres as his personal hero and mentor).In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze introduces a film theory that focuses on the spaces between images and the generative possibilities of juxtaposition. Film:

> is the method of BETWEEN, "between two images," which does away with all cinema of the One. It is the method of AND, "this and then that," which does away with all the cinema of Being = is. Between two actions, between two affections, between two perceptions, between

5 Janes quotes Benjamin's endnote 6 in "The Work of Art" (237).

> two visual images, between the sound and the visual: make the indiscernible, that is the frontier, visible. (180)

What becomes important, in Deleuze's view, is not the association of images, "but the interstices between [them]" (200). Sometimes in film, cuts seem merely functional, and, at other times, they create interactions between two images which "engender or trace a frontier which belongs to neither one nor the other" (181). The notion of frontier-crossing is central in *The Englishman's Boy*, not only thematically, in terms of its exploration of a Canadian identity that is between American and British; but also structurally through a narrative mode that uses cross-cuts, juxtapositions, and faintly perceptible links to create a whole that is all the more resonant or compelling due to its interstices. The contrapuntal structure of the novel resembles the quick and confronting editing techniques of some films and may contribute to keeping readers in a state of heightened awareness.

The novel imitates a filmic structure in a series of "narrative cross-cuts" between chapters that connect present and immediate worlds from different eras. The first cross-cut between narratives connects Fine Man and Broken Horse leading "a stream of horses" like "shining strengthening water" (14) to Canada, with Vincent's meditation in Chapter Two on the recently thawed South Saskatchewan River. While the chapters seem unrelated, the "stream of horses" flows directly into the description of the "cold, black water" (14-15) outside Vincent's window and initiates a connection between the indigenous characters of the 1870s, and Vincent's role in deciphering suppressed narratives from history through his writing.

Other cross-cuts provide more obvious clues about how the narrative strands are related to one another. Chapter 11 concludes with the party of men feasting on the blood and organs of a freshly slaughtered bull; the narrative focuses on the bull's physicality and material presence:

> Hardwick presses the jibbing horse to where the bull waits with black, distended tongue and blood-red eyes, shaking his huge head, flinging threads of slobber into his dirty, matted wool, massive shoulders bridling, the curved, polished horns hooking the air (118).

Vanderhaeghe emphasizes the smell of gunpowder, the "greasy shine" on the grass beneath the coiled intestines, and the "thick and hot"

blood which is drunk from tin cups (118). These sensory details create a scene that is easy not only to visualize, but to smell, hear, feel and taste. Chapter 12 opens with another sensuous moment, as Harry Vincent delivers a bag of groceries to Shorty McAdoo as partial payment for his life stories. Shorty is ravenous and savors every morsel:

> He starts with the cheese, paring cheddar from the wedge, shingling his soda crackers with paper-thin slices. Unhurried, steady chewing, a ruminative savouring of flavour, old turtle eyes squinching up with delight. After that, a can of sardines, forked up with the blade of a jackknife, the empty can mopped clean of the last of the oil, polished shiny with a dry heel of bread (120).

Lastly, he relishes the canned peaches, "piece by piece, rolled slippery and sweet in the mouth, mulled over" and washes them down with whisky sloshed around in the syrupy tin (120). While it is premature at this point in the novel to connect the character of the Englishman's boy with Shorty McAdoo, the juxtaposed feasts suggest an association too deliberate to be inconsequential. Vanderhaeghe does not confirm the connection between the two characters at any point in the novel but leaves the discovery to the reader. Narrative cross-cuts encourage immersions in two present worlds that introduce, as one might see in a film, connections on a sub-conscious level, so that the possibility circulates in a reader's mind, remaining viable but unsubstantiated. Ghosts of images occur and recur, leaving trails of possible connections before the mind's eye.

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze describes the cinema's capacity to produce "the genesis of an "unknown body" which we have in the back of our heads, like the unthought in thought, the birth of the visible which is still hidden from view" (201). In film, we see bodies that are not 'there,' as well as spaces between representations of bodies that were once "there," but are no longer present. Cinema, Deleuze suggests:

> spreads an "experimental night" or a white space over us; it works with "dancing seeds" and a "luminous dust"; it affects the visible with a fundamental disturbance, and the world with a suspension, which contradicts all natural perception (201).

One way in which Vanderhaeghe's novel plays with the element of the 'seen' and the 'unseen' is through meticulous attention to lighting and the illumination of significant moments as though being filmed. After the death of the Englishman, there is a literary equivalent of an establishing shot of the Englishman's boy in the doorway of the Overland Hotel after he stands up to the night clerk and begins his independent life. The boy is described in shades of light and darkness that reflect his haunted past and steely resolve, and it is this ominous vision of the boy, "lit by the light spilling from the doorway, dwarfed by another man's clothes, dwarfed by the long shadow rooted to his heels and stretched in tortured protraction across the pale dust of the street" (50) that discourages the night clerk from pursuing him. As the boy contemplates his future, a cinematic sunrise floods the sky above the Missouri river: "[t]here the strong glow of the rising sun lit a mass of shelving cloud so that it appeared a bank of molten lava squeezed from the guts of the earth, each striation distinct and gleaming with a different fire" (51). From the heart of the sunrise, three tiny black dots gradually become distinguishable in a literary 'long shot' revealing Hardwick, Vogle, and Evans, who become the leading players in the Cypress Hills Massacre.

Film's Effect in Perceiving and Expressing the World

The novel uses references and strategies from film to explore the impact of technological discourses upon the way writers and historians perceive the world. Walter Benjamin begins "The Work of Art" by analyzing the effects technology has on perception and the expression of art (211). He suggests that present-day notions of art are intimately entwined with modernist notions of knowledge, power and technology and illustrates how mechanical reproduction displaces art from its traditional and religious origins and eliminates art's aura. Through arts such as photography and film, the concept of an authentic original is made redundant. As Benjamin puts it: "to ask for the 'authentic print' of a photographic negative, from which any number of prints can be made, 'makes no sense'" (218). Mechanical reproduction does not just affect the dissemination and availability of a work of art, Benjamin argues, but how it is conceived, created, and disseminated: "the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed.

Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics" (218). Vanderhaeghe's novel takes up this point through the character of Damon Ira Chance, who lectures on film's ability to "teach history by lightning" to the masses, lifting a quotation that, outside the novel, is commonly attributed to past President Woodrow Wilson,[6] and proclaims his era "to be a century governed by images, one following upon the other with the speed of the steam locomotive that was the darling of the last century and symbolized all its aspirations" (108). Chance is convinced that film is "the language of the new century" and that hoards of uncultured spectators in the nickelodeons are "learning to think and feel in the language of pictures" (108). While Harry Vincent comes to view Chance's position as didactic, self-serving, and anti-Semitic, he too cannot escape the impact that film has on his mode of perception and expression in narrating his story.

Likewise Vincent's narration of the novel is shaped by filmic references. He interprets scenes from life as though they appear in films, views people and events as if looking through a lens, and maps the geography of Hollywood in terms of which films were made where in the town. Early in the novel, Vincent represents Fitz, Chance's right-hand man and thug, as a kind of a screen henchman, larger and more menacing than he is in life (25). One day, in front of the entire cast and crew, Fitz fires director Bysshe Folkestone. Vincent describes the scene:

> We all stood watching from a distance. It was like a silent movie without subtitles and musical accompaniment. After a few words from Fitz, Bysshe started to wave his arms; his face, in turn, registering outrage, innocence, perplexity, while all around the two of them work continued. (20)

Vincent sets the scene in terms of a silent film which reminds readers of their positions as spectators. Next, Vincent describes what he calls a

6 It is commonly acknowledged that President Woodrow Wilson made such a comment after watching D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. The quotation -- "It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true" -- appears at the beginning of most prints of the film, and is attributed to President Wilson. The president's office later denied the comment when the NAACP protested against the heroic representation of the Ku Klux Klan and the derogatory depiction of black Americans and blackface villains.

pantomime, or what Brecht might call a *gestus* from the theater, designed to provides an awakening shock in the theater by conveying social, and, at times, political messages without language. In Vanderhaeghe's novel, the *gestuses* prompt readers to interpret the social significance of physical actions and, by doing so, interrupt the narrative flow of the text by demanding a different mode of perception. When Hardwick, leader of the wolfers, finds out from the Métis leader where the band of Assiniboine people is camped, he thanks him but refuses to shake the man's hand:

> When the Métis offered his hand to shake, Hardwick ignored it. The Englishman's boy saw the briefest of smiles twitch the Métis' lips and then he ironically and gravely saluted Hardwick, wheeled his horse around, galloped back to the ridge and disappeared behind it (181).

Some physical details in the novel, such as the glimmer of a smile described above, are presented to the reader through a filmic narrative style of close-ups and isolated shots. A tight focus on the minute detail is provided via the placement of the reader looking with what seems to be a camera's eye. Vanderhaeghe uses elements from both epic theater and film to emphasize and frame the significance of body language, actions both large and minute, between characters.

At the novel's end, Harry Vincent describes Chance's reaction at the *Besieged* premiere. His exuberant *gestus* indicates not only his delight in his accomplishment but represents an expression of power and privilege (301). After Chance is shot by Wylie and lies dying, his *gestuses* become harder to interpret: "He [Chance] is beyond speech. He makes a gesture to the wall of rain, to whomever, whatever, he imagines lurks behind it" (306). As spectators, we are prompted to consider the gap between the man's extraordinary view of himself and the reality.

Vincent borrows numerous references from film. Rachel Gold's face is softened in the light rain "like gauze on a lens" (256); he sees Fitz as "the crazy, loyal servant in Murnau's *Nosferatu*. Devoted to the master" (255); describes the tea-colored dawn "like tint in a Griffith picture" (197); and perceives McAdoo's shack as if capturing a tightly framed and artistically stylized image:

> McAdoo pushes the door open and I follow him in. Because of the tar-papered windows, a kerosene lamp sits on an apple box at the far end of a room long and narrow as a shooting gallery, the light making luminous the sheets of an unmade bed. German expressionism, I think to myself. A lot of cameramen would give their eyeteeth for that shot (86).

Film bleeds into life as Harry Vincent views the geography of Hollywood in terms of how movies map the town. Mother Reardon's boarding house is close to where "Griffith constructed the gargantuan Babylon set for his film *Intolerance*" (61); Rachel and Vincent sit on the beach of the Pacific Ocean, "which once doubled for the Red Sea in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*" (253). The novel highlights other parallels between film and life: Vincent describes a scandal involving the actor Fatty Arbuckle, who went from superstar to public enemy when he was accused of raping a young starlet with a glass bottle: "there were reports of women attacking the screen when Arbuckle comedies were shown and Wyoming cowboys riddling them with bullet holes" (24). Chance describes how Erich von Stroheim was attacked in the streets after "playing so many evil Prussians during the war" (107) and refers to the legendary premiere of the Lumière Brothers' film in which a train careers off the screen.[7] Such techniques encourage readers to interrogate the various ways in which history is reconstructed for consumption in early Hollywood films. Vincent remains torn between staying true to Shorty McAdoo's private recollection of the Cypress Hills Massacre, or following Chance's demands to sensationalize it for the screen. While Vincent ends up by creating a skewered filmic representation of Shorty McAdoo's life, his perception of the world is already affected by film in ways of which he is unaware.

7 Martin Loiperdinger exposes the supposed chaos and terror resulting from Louis Lumière's short film *Arrival of the Train as "cinema's founding myth" (89)*. Despite the absence of police or eyewitness reports, journalists have fostered the idea that spectators mistook the image of the train on the screen for reality.

Key Absences and "Inadequate" Language

While the novel's stylistic techniques attempt to recreate the past, Vanderhaeghe recognizes the inherent limitations by playing with key absences and illustrating where language is particularly inadequate. Consider the significant absence of Shorty's memories of the Cypress Hill Massacre, the Holy Grail of stories that Harry Vincent seeks that would link McAdoo to the Englishman's boy from the 1870s narrative. Once Shorty decides to speak, the narrative that ensues is not the story itself, but a description of the storytelling experience: "his voice went on, growing slightly frayed and raspy, hoarse from hours of talk" (196). Readers only obtain a fuller sense of the historical event through the Englishman's boy's recollection of it.

In omitting Shorty's version in his account, Vincent acknowledges how he has exploited the cowboy's memories in a screenplay that was primarily determined by artistic and commercial factors. The novel examines the consequences of appropriating personal histories for mass consumption: in an interview Vanderhaeghe discusses how he also changed certain details from the Cypress Hills Massacre and made artistic decisions that were not strictly historical. He conflated the probable multiple rapes of Assiniboine women into a single rape of a young girl in an attempt to "create a stronger, more horrific moment" (143). There are a few instances in the novel where the language indicates the difficulties of making history present in and vivid through literature. The first and last chapters written from the perspective of the Assiniboine characters have a stilted or translated quality to them. They occupy a prominent, albeit "borderline" position in the novel,[8] absorbing the rest of the text within an "oral" frame, but feature unconvincing dialogue and characterizations. One Assiniboine character describes a white wolfer as "The one with the ugly hair, red like a fox's, he stood making his water and talking over his shoulder" (11). The writing represents an attempt to mimic the syntax of an indigenous language transposed to English, but comes across as imitative of the classic "noble savage" created by non-indigenous writers.

8 Alison Calder points out the "borderline status" of the narratives of the Assiniboine characters that are relegated to the first and last chapters and suggests that such positioning is "a deliberate creative strategy designed to point to the absences" of indigenous voices in Shorty's story (104).

Each section of the novel utilizes different modes of speech – Assiniboine "translations," cowboy idioms, Hollywood shop-talk – and suggests the difficult task of connecting the experiences of the characters from the past to contemporary readers. While choosing suitable dialogue is not commonly the task of the historian, as Vanderhaeghe points out, it is necessary when writing historical fiction to "masquerade as an actor present at the events he [*sic*] describes and discusses" (144). Vanderhaeghe read many tales of the Old West and struggled to believe the dialogue he encountered. He had to determine whether the writers of such accounts "may have been influenced by dime novel Westerns they undoubtedly read" or if "average Montanans of the 1870s actually talked this gibberish" (145). He writes:

> The problem is that this speech, even if it is authentic and correct, can only strike modern readers as parody, leaving them feeling like they've been dropped in the Mel Brooks' movie *Blazing Saddles* to be harangued by actors cranked on hallucinogens and mimicking Gabby Hayes, Walter Brennan, and Slim Pickens. As a literary language it is worse than inadequate, it is laughable. What I settled for was an illusion of authenticity. So my characters all talk an artificial, invented language that I hoped the reader would swallow as historical (145).

Vanderhaeghe devised the Englishman's boy's dialect in part from the 1878 diaries of L.A. Huffman, and pieces of *Huckleberry Finn*; Rachel Gold's character resembles Dorothy Parker and Anita Loos; while Chance is a mixture of Henry Adams and H. L. Mencken (144). As the illusion of authenticity was Vanderhaeghe's aim, the need to render the dialogue comprehensible to contemporary readers took precedence over its historical accuracy.

Vanderhaeghe dramatizes the dilemma of creating convincing dialogue through Rachel's and Vincent's struggles to writes convincing scripts. Rachel tells Vincent:

> For anything prior to 1600, be it Babylon or Tudor England, crib the King James version of the Bible.

> This satisfies the nose-pickers in Chattanooga who can read, although sometimes they get confused and believe they're conning the word of God, which can later lead to confusion in tent meetings. For American historical costume dramas, the Declaration of Independence is an unfailing model for the speech of the quality. When it comes to frontier gibberish I merely reproduce the kitchen-table conversation of the relatives of my former husband. The Gentile one (44).

The novel incorporates Biblical allusions and apocalyptic imagery when the characters, particularly in the Englishman's boy's narrative, become fearful and withdrawn. After interfering with and shooting Hardwick's bull, the Scotchman resorts to mystical and incoherent religious babble, frightening the other wolfers who believe he has lost his senses. Vanderhaeghe writes: "When folks went scare, or off their heads, they'd been known to pile on the Bible talk. The Scotchman seemed to be a bit of both" (125). The Scotchman rails on about "the way of the Bible Jews," "the wild God of dreams and visions" and "the Devil's Sabbath," consisting of a "foul cup of blood" and "uncooked flesh" (125). Later that night, the Englishman's boy sees an apocalyptic vision of the dead white horse that adds to his sense of foreboding. Despite Rachel's warning about how and why Bible talk is used strategically in her scripts, the Englishman's boy's narrative seems designed to bridge, through mystical and sacred references, the gap between the historical past and the readers' present. Readers are situated inside a construction of history that acknowledges the limitations of language and flaunts them.

In silent films, language is withheld, yet not absent. The lips of the characters move, and subtitles provide narrative descriptions and/or dialogue to clarify the images, yet the gap between words spoken and words heard remains. Silent films contain trace stories that spectators do not hear or see, yet due to the conventions of silent films, they can fill in the gaps. Vanderhaeghe's novel likewise illustrates that language can be, at times, incomplete; it stands in for what cannot be expressed. He suggests that something inaccessible or inexpressible lurks behind language, and what it cannot successfully "access" or "dramatize," it represents through inscrutability.

Transitional Discourses

One of the focus areas of the novel is on transitional discourses in rapidly changing worlds. How a story is told is of great concern to several characters in the novel, including Strong Bull, Shorty McAdoo, Harry Vincent, and Damon Ira Chance. The novel's form reflects this concern in its engagement with and acknowledgment of "auxiliary" discourses such as oral storytelling, scripts, films, and the theater, and its recognition of the need for more than one mode of relating a story. *The Englishman's Boy* has been reconstructed through several different forms -- oral, written and cinematic. Before the novel was published, excerpts from the novel were broadcast on CBC Radio's *Ambience*.[9] In 1996, producer Kevin DeWalt began his 12-year project of adapting the novel into a four-hour miniseries for CBC Television, directed by John N. Smith and starring R. H. Thomson and Bob Hoskins. The series eventually premiered in 2008. Vanderhaeghe plays a small role as the barkeeper, and the film focuses on the 1873 part of the story.[10]

In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Michel Foucault writes: "Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them" (200). *The Englishman's Boy* explores ways in which discourses impact on the telling of stories and capture the moments of transition that accompany them. In the last chapter, Strong Bull tells Fine Man why he "spent his days drawing pictures in the lying books" (312). He explains that he draws the pictures "so the grandchildren will recognize us" in a world that is constantly changing (314). While it may appear that Vanderhaeghe prioritizes the written word-as-fact as opposed to oral testimonies, I concur with Daniela Janes' assertion that "Vanderhaeghe's endorsement of the text-as-record is a guarded one" (101). Rather than reifying the "white" Western way of recording information, Strong Bull's book of drawings represents

9 Vanderhaeghe notes this in his "Acknowledgements" in *The Englishman's Boy (318)*.

10 Robertson, "CBC TV shoots Western mini-series." When asked how he adapted his novel to a screenplay, Vanderhaeghe replied: "John Irving said it best: First you have to make the decision, which two-thirds of it do I leave out? When you go to tell the story, you have to choose. Which character do you focus on? We decided to place the emphasis on the 1873 part of the story."

a search (imperfect and political as it may be) for an enduring method of storytelling in a time of cultural and technological transition.

Harry Vincent also dreams of a discursive form that will convey the essence of a present historical moment. No single discursive mode, oral, written or filmic, satisfies his desire to "be there." When Chance dislikes the written version of Shorty McAdoo's first anecdote, Vincent realizes he needs to tell the story in a different way, yet remains unsure of how to do it:

> I berate myself for my stupid assumption that words on the page can convey what I have learned about McAdoo […] Words on the page are not capable of communicating this. It had been the burial, the drawing in of night, the incessant wind, the way McAdoo held himself in the chair, the flick of the boot slamming closed the stove door, the sudden darkness, the voice playing scales in the darkness, beginning flat as dictation, then growing troubled, self-questioning. All this I suddenly see as more important than what he said; the *feel* of the night was its meaning. (156)

To resolve his dilemma, Vincent draws on the discourses of drama and film, focusing on bodies, gestures, lighting, and connecting moments in history with the present when writing his memoir. Vanderhaeghe similarly addresses the challenge of "being there" by integrating dramatic and cinematic discourses into a layered, multi-discursive literary form.

The novel is as suspicious of singular fictive modes used to describe history as it is of clear-cut historical accounts. Vanderhaeghe clarifies this in *Drumlummon Views*: "In writing *The Englishman's Boy* I had hoped to issue a warning: beware of anyone who hands you history too neatly packaged whether it come wrapped up in histories, films, or historical novels" (146). His self-professed take on historical fiction is "to present the past as a textured, lived experience, experience from the 'inside'" (2006, 145). By incorporating elements from dramatic and filmic discourses, Vanderhaeghe develops a text in which readers can immerse themselves in history in sensuous and experiential ways, while recognizing the impact the narrative perspective and discursive form has on the story. The novel does not gloss over historical gaps, but shines a luminous light of possibility upon them to embrace the inexpressible and the potentiality of the unknown.

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