

Forster on film: What he believed

Thom D. Chesney

Texas Wesleyan University, USA

September 1998

Abstract

This article reveals Forster's views on the cinema, arguing his perspective was clearly not an immutable one; over time he either amended or eliminated certain impressions, although some re-emerged later. Primary works written by Forster open the study, to develop his ideas about stage and screen at specific times. The second section draws from existing biographies and commentaries and includes correspondence of Forster's colleagues and friends who were involved in the industry. Thus, a clearer picture of Forster's views on film emerges than a single passage or excerpt might provide, further revealing the ongoing shift/stasis of his position.

Key words: E. M. Forster, Film, Criticism.

There is little doubt that the success of four films based upon the novels of E. M. Forster revitalised public interest in the author's work. Under David Lean's direction, *A Passage to India* appeared in 1984, followed by three productions from the producer/director team of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory: *A Room with a View*, 1986; *Maurice*, 1987; and *Howards End*, 1992. For each of the Merchant-Ivory films, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala composed the script. This was no small task, considering that during his life Forster voiced serious reservations about his novels ever moving from the page to the screen.

To illuminate this last point, this investigation of E. M. Forster's perspective on the cinema considers first his published criticism of dramatic performances —since they began with a written script and were then adapted for the stage— and then moves through an assortment of Forster's letters, life and personal experience in the arts, especially film. Through such a survey it becomes clear that more often than not Forster was less than fond of the motion picture medium, and, as the following comments suggest, there is good reason for his own works' appearance on the silver screen only after his death.

As a regular contributor to *The Athenaeum* in 1919, early on Forster shows a very critical and sometimes sceptical eye for the successful transition of text into performance. He calls the play *Amis and Amiles* «a charming but sentimental old French story which one would expect to collapse on the

stage» (Amis, 1919: 662). Later he adds that «the more emotion there is in [a] character, the less there is apt to be in the audience. This is an unfortunate law. It works in pictures too, as Piero della Francesca discovered, stirring our souls to the depth with his immobile, expressionless angels» (Amis, 1919: 663). This recognition of and concern for the fine lines separating overacting, realism and literal illusion was never lost on Forster, either as a critic or patron of the arts.

Forster hardly stops here; in fact, just a month later he writes of a performance of *Green Pastures and Piccadilly*: «Squashed in a lift, in a mass of other respectable people, one thought, «Why are such plays written, why produced? Has John Walton, [the playwright], ever for one moment thought clearly or felt deeply upon his subject or irregular unions? Has she (or he) ever conceived of sin except as something that makes the stage go round?»... It can be done! But it has to be done differently». (Green, 1919: 790). It is also during this period when Forster describes his belief that the transition from script to stage is one of the most difficult undertakings writer and director can attempt, because the end effect can rarely match that which a reader perceives from the text prior to its production —stopping short of describing the continuous fictional dream.

Nonetheless, Forster does not set his expectations so high as to dismiss the possibility of producing a successful stage performance, noting: «[W]hen a play is poorly constructed, undistinguished in diction, conventional in character-drawing, devoid of beauty, and morally a fake, one might conclude that it is a bad play. The conclusion may be wrong. For there is another quality that can exist independent of all the above, and win the dramatist a triumph of a sort: grip». («Grip», 1919: 852) But as quickly as he apparently gives some latitude here, he returns in two weeks in the *Athenaeum* to compare a play to a pool of water shut off from sunshine and the winds by a barrier of rocks:

[T]he pool is supposed to be real, in the sense that our daily lives are real. Trains can be caught in it, chocolate eaten, pianofortes played, telephones are installed from marge to marge, and the play is a good play if it persuades us to accept these conventions, and to believe that the chocolates are picked up between real fingers and thumbs and vanish into real mouths. [...] The conventional play has triumphed if it has prevented the spectator from examining its fundamentals, and led him without protest from the chocolates to the actress who eats them. («Maternal», 1919: 923)

Again Forster reinforces his position that the realism and suspension of disbelief so present in the successful novel are equally crucial elements to a successful dramatic performance. It comes as no surprise, then, that he practically mocks a series of Tolstoy fragments staged in October at the St. James Theatre:

When the curtain rose a clever but limited actress... began doing her little bit as a shrew. It was amusing to note how Tolstoy would have none of

Miss Thomas and how promptly the play soared out of her grasp. Her methods were cut and dried, but the play intended to be about life. [...] But Tolstoy so dominates any Tolstoyan performance that one cannot get away from him, and while one is with him all others seem worthless. («Tolstoy», 1919: 1011)

Moving now from stage to screen commentary, nearly fifteen years pass before E. M. Forster speaks for the first time at length about film. The levity and satire of «Mickey and Minnie» have made it a favourite of Forster's shorter essays, but more important to the discussion here is the long opening paragraph in which Forster clarifies his position on the cinema in general:

I am a film-fanned rather than a film fan, and oh the things I have had to see and hear because other people wanted to! About once a fortnight a puff of wind raises me from the seat where I am meditating upon life or art, and wafts me in amiability's name towards a very different receptacle. [...] Here art is not, life not. Not happy, not unhappy, I sit in an up-to-date stupor, while the international effort unrolls. [...] All around me, I have reason to believe, sit many fellow film-fanneds, chaff from the winnowing like myself, but we do not communicate with one another, and are indistinguishable from ecstasy in the gloom. Stunned by the howls of the Wurlitzer organ, choked by the fumes of the cigars —and here I break off again, in a style not unsuited to the subject. («Mickey», 1934: 81)

And so it would appear the avid theatre-goer is less than impressed by its cinematic competition; this at a time when the number of *The Times* «Moving Pictures» advertisements still lagged far behind those for plays.

Though he was only a year from proclaiming, «Broadcasting and the cinema have wiped out the drama, and quite soon we may hope for some new invention which will wipe out the cinema industry and Broadcasting House» («Does», 1951: 100-101), it was not so much the threat of film's popularity superseding that of stage drama that worried Forster, as it was his own curiosity and admitted ignorance in matters of this the newest of the arts. In February of 1934 his education would begin.

It was in that month that Christopher Isherwood asked Forster to come to visit the film set of *Little Friend* —a project which was begun in 1933 and soon became Isherwood's when Margaret Kennedy walked out on the screenplay to pursue a new novel, creating an immediate need for a replacement. The film was to be the first of a series of three to be directed by the Viennese-born Jewish film director, Berthold Viertel, and by mid-December Gaumont-British Studios had retained Isherwood as a dialogue director and «unofficially as a mediator between the volatile Viertel and studio executives» (Finney, 1979: 103-104). As Brian Finney notes, the experience changed Isherwood forever, and he «enjoyed the extrovert role in the studio [inviting] many of his friends to visit the set, including Forster» (1979: 105). Upon the film's release, the screenwriter responded to his friends' less-than-positive

criticism saying, «[I]f I sold myself, I did at least make them pay handsomely for me», a remark Forster carried with him to his death (Finney, 1979: 105).

At the time, however, Forster was impressed by the strangeness of the filmmaking process he had witnessed that evening. He wrote Isherwood about a month later to thank him: «I have often thought about it and described it to other people without interesting them. It is a milieu —so energetic, friendly and horrible. I can't believe everything isn't going to crash when such a wagon (sic) gets so many stars hitched behind. Every film I ever see will now appear incredibly good» (*Selected letters*, 1985: 120). In fact, Forster was one of *Little Friend's* strongest supporters; his friendship with Isherwood aside, he viewed it three times and later confided to his peer, «I hardly see anyone whom I care to look at on the films» (*Selected letters*, 1985: 129). Three years later Forster would find himself nearly in Isherwood's shoes.

Though his 1938 pageant play *England's Pleasant Land* had little hope of ever becoming a motion picture (nor was it the author's intent), the writing and production brought Forster into the middle of the text to stage transition. *The Times*, *The New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, and *Theatre World* not surprisingly all gave generally positive reviews of both the acting and technical aspects. As such, a less self-critical author and playwright might have been inspired to pursue more ambitious projects, but Forster was not and knew well that the play was a one-time proposition —an occasion to raise money for the preservation of part of England's countryside. It was very different from the performances on major and minor London stages, and so he neither took too much pleasure nor motivation from the press, even though one writer argued that the play «could (one hopes that it may) be performed in every English county» («Pageant», 1938: 143). It has since been all but forgotten, indeed excluded from many Forster biographies.

Later, in 1945, Forster was asked by Basil Wright, producer and director of several documentary films, to view a rough-edit of Humphrey Jennings's *A diary for Timothy* — «a film scrapbook of the last nine months of the war for a child born in September 1944» (Murphy, 1989: 78). Forster's response to the rough-edit is not as confident as his stage criticism, but in it he makes clear his reservations with composing a running commentary for the film unless some changes are made or at least considered:

I don't much trust my own judgement over films —I am either hypersensitive or obtuse— but I felt sympathetic to the general idea, and admired the fine sensitive details. My trouble... is that —quite contrary to the intention of the producers— the film comes out with a social slant and suggests that the world Britain ought to be kept right for this one class of baby and not got right for babies in general. (*Selected letters*, 1985: 212)

Forster goes on to suggest changes to make Tim's plight more universal, that the England pictured be as cynical as it is «strenuous and enduring», and that a Soviet youth song at the film's end will probably «have to be scrapped for

political reasons» (*Selected letters*, 1985: 212-213). Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since Forster's play reviews called for realism and a commitment to accuracy of the text to be depicted; now, on the verge of his first participatory venture into the film industry, he applied the same standards. His suggestions went largely unheeded—a first lesson in film-making, perhaps—and when *A diary for Timothy* was released in November 1945 under the Crown Film Unit and presented by the Ministry of Information, Forster found himself for the first time at the mercy of the cinema critics. From *The Times*:

Any film with such a pedigree and with the commentary written by Mr. E. M. Forster is worthy of serious attention, and the pity is that *A diary for Timothy*, which has, according to the programme, «the thematic idea that the world is at the end of an epoch», should not make any mention at all of the invention which will be at the core of all Timothy's problems [the atomic bomb]. [...] [B]y ignoring the bomb which destroyed Hiroshima, the detonation of which was heard within the time limit this film lays down for itself, it shirks the issues it well-meaningly attempts to raise. [...] [And], idealistic and intelligent as it is, it seems to be at sparring distance from, rather than at close quarters with, its theme. It is not only the atom bomb which makes *A diary for Timothy* seem a little out of date. (*Diary*, 1945: 6)

The more recent criticism of film scholars has been equally negative:

Jennings's method is fraught with danger—none of the characters is given real individuality and the banality of everyday life threatens to drown the great events of the war as reflected in the news broadcasts which he uses throughout the film. [...] Lacking the dynamism of a real commitment to a changed society, both Jennings and Forster hesitate on the brink of peace, meditate gloomily on the disasters which have been and even look forward with some apprehension to freedom itself. (Armes, 1978: 156-157)

Were he not mentioned by name, one might suspect Forster as the author of these two critiques, but such is not the case; in fact, he had very little to say following the film's release.

Why, then, are we left with *A diary for Timothy* as Forster's only notable film work to appear during his lifetime? Perhaps the clearest explanations come from a play review and a letter written during the last decade of his life—the first, written about him; the second, composed by Forster himself. While the 1960 stage adaptation of *A Passage to India* (all but the final section of the novel) admittedly fell flat, consider the harshness of *The Times* review of June 7, 1963, sub-headed «Drastic Effect of Adaptation», with respect to the Arts Theatre production of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*:

Elizabeth Hart has made a neat, old-fashioned play out of E. M. Forster's novel. It coarsens the original, but perhaps that is unavoidable. [...] What does come as a surprise is its triviality. [...] The sense of moral ambiguity in

Forster's writing has largely evaporated in the adaptation. What we are left with is a slow-moving though thoroughly stage-worthy action, and a collection of drastically simplified characters. [...] Two effects follow from this. One is that no matter how much the action requires it, characters cannot develop. [...] The second effect of the adaptation is to simplify the issues to such an extent that the play becomes what the novel certainly is not — a period piece that might have been written by an Edwardian Ustinov. («Forster», 1963: 15)

Forster responded in *The Times* five days later, not to defend the adaptation of his novel but one of the performers who had excelled in the role of Gino.

Then there is Forster's letter to his friend Santha Rama Rau, the woman who had originally dramatized *A Passage to India* on a dinner party challenge but was later unable to convince him of the novel's potential as a film. The time was 1967, she was one of his closest friends, and Forster had already remarked to her and others a few years earlier how he «distrusted Hollywood» (*Selected letters*, 1985: 277). It is in this light and all his prior experience with the stage and screen that Forster seems to give his final word on the matter of a film adaptations. He says, «I didn't and don't want *A Passage [to India]* filmed. I am so sorry» (*Selected letters*, 1985: 290). We might insert *A Room with a View*, *Howards End*, and *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in the same statement, but it is clear that for whatever his reasons, Forster preferred his novels as novels only. We need only return to the closing passage of «Mickey and Minnie» where Forster treats the title characters as a potential metaphor for film in general. He writes:

What of their future? At present Mickey is everybody's god, so that even members of the Film Society cease despising their fellow members when he appears. But gods are not immortal. There was an Egyptian called Bes, who was once quite as gay, and Brer Rabbit and Felix the Cat have been forgotten too, and Ganesh is being forgotten. Perhaps he and Minnie will follow them into oblivion. I do not care two hoots. I am all for the human race. But how fortunate that it should have been accompanied, down the ages, by so many cheerful animals, and how lucky that the cinema has managed to catch the last of them in its questionable reels. («Mickey», 1934: 82)

As sarcastic as this commentary is sincere, Forster's unsettled opinion of film seems to have carried over into his decision to protect his novels from the fate of so many fallen gods before them.

References

- ARMES, Roy (1978). «A critical history of the British cinema». (24 Nov. 1945) *The Times*, 6A. *A diary for Timothy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- FINNEY, Brian (1979). *Christopher Isherwood: A critical biography*. London: Faber.
- FORSTER, Edward Morgan (1919). «*Amis and Amiles* at Weybridge». Rev. of the play. *The Athenaeum*, 4642, 662-663.

- (1919). «Green Pastures and Piccadilly». Rev. of the play by John Walton. *The Athenaeum* 4660, 790.
- (1919). «Grip». Rev. of *The voice from the minaret*, by Robert Hichens. *The Athenaeum* 4662, 852.
- (1919). «Maternal Love». Rev. of *Trimmed in scarlet*, by William Hurlbut. *The Athenaeum* 4664, 923-924.
- (1919). «Tolstoy at the St. James». Rev. of *Reparation*, by Leo Tolstoy. *The Athenaeum* 4667, 1011. «Forster issues simplified». (7 June 1963) *The Times*, 15A.
- (1934). «Mickey and Minnie». *The Spectator* 5508, 81-82.
- (1951). «Does culture matter?». *Two cheers for democracy*, 100-107. New York: Harcourt.
- (1985). *Selected letters of E. M. Forster*. Lago, Mary and P. N. Furbank (eds.). Vol. 2. London: Collins.
- HAMPSON, John (1938). «Pageant». *The Spectator*, 161, 143.
- MURPHY, Robert (1989). *Realism and tinsel: Cinema and society in Britain 1939-1948*. London: Routledge.