

***Howards End* (James Ivory): From Heritage and Materialism to the Spatialization of Connection**

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In the following notes, I suggest that one of the key terms in “heritage criticism”, which *agrégation* students should be familiar with, can be investigated so as to develop another approach of the aesthetic of Merchant-Ivory’s *Howards End*: its supposed *materialism*. As a theme but also more than the fault that the concept of “aesthetics of display” has turned it into, materialism reveals its presence in the film as a formal motif of (dis)connection as well as in the consistent spatialization of characters and of “personal relations” (Forster) which is given pride of place in the adaptation.

In the 1990s, Merchant-Ivory costume drama adaptations became the most perfect example of the conservative, nostalgic evolution of British cinema. Cairns Craig’s article paved the way for what was to become “heritage criticism”:

Imagine a film rich with scenes shot in Cambridge colleges and lush English countryside, set to an accompaniment of horse-drawn carriages with the occasional punctuation of bursts of steam at railway stations. This far from imaginary work is part of a cinematic genre which has had a remarkable prominence in the 80s: a genre which focuses on the English middle and upper classes at home and abroad before they were drowned by the flood of the First World War and the end of the Empire. Its source is often literary—and most often E. M. Forster. (Cairns Craig, “Rooms without a View”, *Sight and Sound*, 1/2, June 1991, 10-13, 10)

What prevails in these films is some sort of obsession for an idealised Britain, which obviously “shows” in lush images and a preference for realism testifying to a desire to reconstruct the past. The adaptations of Forster’s novels become nothing more than beautiful postcards. Here is how Andrew Higson defines “heritage film”:

These are films set in the past, telling stories of the manners and proprieties, but also the often transgressive romantic entanglements of the upper- and upper middle-class English,

in carefully detailed and visually splendid period reconstructions. The luxurious country-house settings, the picturesque rolling green landscapes of southern England, the pleasures of period costume, and the canonical literary reference points are among the more frequently noted attractions of such films. (Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama since 1980*, Oxford, OUP, 2003, 1)

In his 2003 book, Higson prolongs his first articles and essays on the subject and devotes a whole chapter to the study of *Howards End*, which he considers as a perfect illustration of the ways a heritage film reinvents the past so as to build up a form of deceptive heritage supposed to help us better understand both a common, glorious past and the necessity to cling to Englishness/Britishness in the present. Besides, what Higson also deplores is the equally false, idealised and imaginary topographies that the films merely show off and *display*: “Heritage cinema plays a crucial role in this process of imagining English nationhood, by telling symbolic stories of class, gender, ethnicity, and identity, and staging them in the most picturesque landscapes and houses of the Old Country” (*ibid.*, 50). *Howards End* is first read as a conservative project:

With its attention to period detail, its self-consciously artistic production values, its relatively conventional story-telling style, its avoidance of irony, and its slow-moving and gentle narrative about English elites of the Edwardian period, *Howards End* can seem a very conservative film. [...] Some audiences certainly saw the film as nostalgic—and some delighted in it for that very reason, while others were horrified by the way it seemed to recreate an ideal, prelapsarian England as seen through rose-tinted spectacles. (*Ibid.*, 147)

If the content and message may be of a more liberal kind sometimes, the form remains conservative: “As with so many of the heritage films, it is this ambivalence that fascinates me, this tension between the *narrative* critique of established national traditions, social formations, and identities, and the *visual* celebration of elite culture and a mythic landscape” (*ibid.*, 149). To further conceptualise such formal conservatism, Higson coins the phrase “aesthetics of display”:

Heritage culture appears petrified, frozen in moments that virtually fall out of the narrative, existing only as adornments for the staging of a love story. Thus, from this point

of view, historical narrative is transformed into spectacle; heritage becomes excess, not functional *mise-en-scène*, not something to be used narratively, but something to be admired. [...] This heritage presence is enhanced by the visual style that the film-makers have adopted, what I've called the aesthetics of display—that is, a particular use of the camera and a particular way of editing that works superbly to display as spectacle this range of heritage properties. (*Ibid.*, 39 and 172)

This aesthetics of display is grounded on formal specificities: “The narratives of most of these films are typically slow-moving, episodic, and de-dramatized; that is to say, they do not normally adopt the efficient and economic causal development of the classical film, or its fast pace and narrative energy.” (*Ibid.*, 37); “The decoupage and the camerawork tend towards the languid. There is a preference for long takes and deep staging, for instance, and for long and medium shots, rather than for close-ups and rapid or dramatic cutting.” (*Ibid.*, 38); “The camera is characteristically fluid, but camera movement often seems dictated less by a desire to follow the movement of characters than by a desire to offer the spectator a more aesthetic angle on the period setting and the objects which fill it.” (*Idem*)

This is how Higson then reads many shots or scenes from *Howards End*, arguing for instance that “shots of grand buildings in London, or at Oxford colleges, are often shot from a high angle or low angle position which seems to serve no narrative purpose, but shows off the buildings wonderfully” (*ibid.*, 173). As a first way for them to analyse the film, *agrégation* students should know and understand the essentials of Higson's theoretical and analytical framework, the better to build up their own reading of the film as an adaptation. For instance, it is true that when Margaret and Tibby mention Helen's postcards [1:50], the slow panning shot underlines the magnificent Oxford architecture much more than the characters themselves. Other shots could be read likewise, at Oniton [1:25], or when Charles drives Aunt Juley to Howards End [0:10].

However, the concepts of “heritage film” and “aesthetics of display” must be qualified and further problematised, in order to look at how Ivory's camera and editing do not merely aim at displaying the beauty of a landscape of a house, but actually build up meaning and partake of a specific approach to adaptation. On the hospital scene, when Ruth scribbles her last will, Higson writes that the slow movement of camera from the inner yard of the building to Charles's and Evie's faces is “narratively unmotivated”: “But it is also possible to conclude that the view is solely for the camera—or, to put it another way, that the shot is designed to display a unique heritage property (the building), to offer a view for the enjoyment and

appreciation of the spectator.” (*Idem*) It could be argued that other things are at stake here, for instance the opposition between the Wilcoxes’ cold, clinical indeed, reaction and Margaret’s warmer behaviour—an opposition which the camera may be already trying to erase by connecting the two families as best it can. Similarly, in the shots on Admiralty Arch [0:33], what comes through is much more the “formlessness” (Margaret’s word in the novel) and the frenzy of London than a mere visual glorification of the splendid city. Not much is actually “displayed” here.

One of Higson’s other major points is that the Merchant-Ivory heritage films might ignore the social, ideological or even political message of the source-texts. As is well known, such a message can be found in Forster’s *Howards End*, though perhaps not so easily as Higson suggests. According to him, even the Englishness/Britishness of the films is a failure since it does not respect its complex treatment in the novels:

[E. M. Forster’s novels] are centrally concerned with Englishness—but rarely is English identity framed as permanent and unchanging. On the contrary, Forster argues for a liberal-humanist refashioning of Englishness, rather than a simple assumption of an already formed national identity. The emphasis on the image and on period detail in the films of his novels can produce a very different effect, however. (*Ibid.*, 80)

Once more, what Higson deplors is the over-simplifying process at work in the film, though now in its content and no longer in its form alone. Peter J. Hutchings put forward a similar idea in 1995:

The aesthetic values and cultural functions of two kinds of texts—Edwardian novels and contemporary films—are disparate in suggestive ways: the novels’ troubled negotiations of connection compared to the films’ comfortable presentations of bourgeois Englishness. [...] The vision of these films often presents an historical husk, a static, untroubled past only disturbed by the banal negotiations of romantic love.(Peter J. Hutchings, “A Disconnected View: Forster, Modernity and Film”, in Jeremy Tambling, ed., *E. M. Forster*, Basingstoke & London, Macmillan, 1995, 213-228, 214 and 218)

Even more telling are Jeremy Tambling’s words, as the editor of the book, at the end of Hutchings’s essay:

For many people in the 1980s and 1990s, contact with Forster has been through the successful films of his work. The reason for including an essay on the films is that it is here the debate about Forster has continued, downplaying elements of modernism in his work and co-opting him for a highly conservative position. Questions of how Forster can be represented link to others about the function of literature as the national heritage. [...] In the Merchant-Ivory films, a different kind of Englishness is projected: [...] a ‘beautiful’ rather camp vision, with beautiful unthreatening actors, quite knowing about homosexuality, which indeed has become, in certain ‘acceptable’ forms, part of mainstream British culture. It contains homosexuality so that its transgressiveness (which implies its part within modernism) is occluded, just as it is deeply patronising about class issues, as with Leonard Bast, encouraging through the film’s diegesis which so decentres him, an objectifying of Bast. [...] The films read Forster in a way which is likely to become hegemonic, but their simplifications, their unawareness of an unconscious affecting the characters and their situations, their refusal to separate themselves from the characters’ self-presentations, make monologic what Forster leaves ambiguous, and what disturbs him and the reader. (*Ibid.*, 225)

In this reading of the adaptation, it is not only Forster’s message which is betrayed but also its modernist angles. Together with the two cornerstones in Higson’s theoretical and critical system, many points here can help *agrégation* students problematise their work on the film, for instance Leonard’s supposed reification, or the film as a denial of the novel’s progressist outlook and multifaceted ambiguities.

In what follows, I suggest that one way to do so, i.e. not see the film only through the prism of an aesthetic of display, might be to consider how it is based on a visual, formal, rhythmic adaptation of many of the oppositions *and* connections at the heart of the book, be they between the three families, between London and Howards End, or between capitalist materialism and more cultural spheres. By opting for some editing forms which adapt these oppositions and connections in the very surface of the film, sometimes verging on intermediality, *Howards End* moves from the aesthetic of display to some “significant form” (Clive Bell, *Art* (1914), London, Chatto and Windus, 1931) beyond heritage.

The novel has often been blamed for its too manichean approach of London and of suburban Howards End, even though the latter is “not really the country, and it’s not the town” (*Howards End*, 291). The same thing could be said on the film, which offers images of a blocked-up, oppressive, formless London, radically opposed to the very graphic shots on

Howards End and their large depth of field. This is also to be noticed in the scenes on Leonard's walks, in which Ivory's first use of the Panavision 2.35:1 format and of Kodak film is revealed in highly contrasted images. The opening scene in the garden at Howards End already holds many of the Forsterian topographic dichotomies: inside/outside, culture/nature, public/private, etc. The house and the garden are shot as natural, bucolic spaces [0:05], [0:06], [1:16]. This is also perceptible in the images (these inserts on flowers covered with dew) which work as a transition to Howards End after Ruth's death [0:42]. What obtains here may be something more than illustration or display, such as an aesthetic slowness and delicacy of sorts which stands in stark contrast with the London shots. Besides, the form becomes significant precisely because nothing is displayed here: no dissolve, hardly any movement of camera, but instead a rather sharp type of editing, which could be said to be paratactic, juxtaposing as it does the flowers and then the parts of the house in the same brutal manner that the Wilcoxes will then show when neglecting and destroying Ruth's last will.

These contrasts are also enhanced by the narrative rhythm of the film. The order in which some scenes appear in the book is sometimes altered on screen, with the effect of underlining narratively and visually the oppositions and connections between spaces and families. For instance, Margaret witnesses the presence of the Wilcoxes in London at the very heart of the Beethoven/umbrella sequence [0:16]; the last scenes at Oniton unfold in reverse order in the film (the reconciliation between Margaret and Henry, then the writing of the letter, finally the scene with Helen and Leonard [1:38]), so that the letter works as an agent of transition but also of connection (Helen ignores and burns her sister's letter the very same way the Wilcoxes did with Ruth's note). To Andrew Higson: "In repeatedly cutting back and forth between the fortunes of the impoverished Bastis, on the one hand, and those of the much more wealthy and privileged Schlegels and Wilcoxes on the other, the film is able to draw attention to class difference." (Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, 151)

In his presentation of the aesthetic of display, Higson writes that it is characterised by an absence of close-ups and an excess of long shots, which he sees as testifying to another absence, that of any formal research: "The look of the film is dominated by the attention to period detail, with the *mise-en-scène* positively littered with heritage properties." (*Ibid.*, 172) He goes as far as evoking the fetishism of heritage films: "What comes across is very often a fetishistic attitude towards surface impressions, a fascination with period detail, a reverence for source material." (*Ibid.*, 42); "the fetishizing of what is seen as a rose-tinted, conservative vision of the past is one of the problems with the films." (*Ibid.*, 63). In his introduction to the "Modern Library" edition of Forster's novel, James Ivory avers:

Forster had doubts about his plots, which he feared were insubstantial and overdependent on coincidence and fate. [...] Yet they are stronger than he knew or today's reader might at first realize, and somehow they also bear the weight of the solid, realistic mass of episode and detail that the film adaptations of his novels require. (James Ivory, "Introduction", in E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (1910), New York, Modern Library, 1999, xi-xx, xii)

Ivory claims all the material details somehow necessary to the verisimilitude of his adaptation were already present in the novel. On this issue, we may agree with Higson rather: "[Forster] is less a novelist of place than of ideas and manners. Place, setting, and *mise-en-scène* in Forster are dealt with in very general terms, rather than observed with the obsessively detailed eye of the art directors of the films adapted from his novels." (Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, 81) It is true that materialism in Forster's writing is more complex than it seems—it may be equally true that the question must be examined in Ivory's adaptation along other lines than a mere aesthetic of display. First, there is no doubt that many shots are based on a form of materialism connected with props and Ivory's obsession for a most realistic reconstruction of Edwardian England. This *period* aspect of the film comes across in the first scene at Wickham Place, which opens on the china set in the foreground which almost reifies Margaret and her aunt into others props around the table. There is no depth of field behind the women, which accentuates the reification of their bodies against other china pieces in *display* cabinets [0:04]. A same kind of excessive materialism characterises many other shots (see for instance [0:15], [1:44] and [1:49]).

In both the novel and the film, Helen is regularly associated to books and reading, for instance when she comes back to Howards End (250) [1:57]. According to Mary Katherine Hall, the film oversimplifies what is suggested in intricate ways in the novel about the cultural dangers of capitalism: "While the novel recognizes and problematizes culture's relationship to capitalism, the film reifies and sacralizes culture." (Mary Katherine Hall, "The Reification of High Culture in Merchant-Ivory's *Howards End*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2003, 31.3, 221-226, 225) It could also be argued that the film interrogates the links between materialism and the intimate, the unseen, personal relations—many fundamental themes in the novel. At Howards End but also Oniton, intimate conversations take place in front of luxurious motor-cars [0:07, 1:29], which play a major part in Forster's criticism of modernity. As in many other films, in *Howards End* Ivory shows how fond he is of inserts on telegraphs or old trains, but

once again, there may be more to this aspect of his work than an aesthetic of display. His camerawork often points at an excess of materialism and its colonisation of the intimate. For instance, the one shot on Margaret and Henry's wedding [1:46] quite fittingly adapts the dryness of information with which the event is reported in the book (220). The shot is made up of one very slow movement of camera towards the register, underlining the Wilcoxes' rigid materialism as much as that of the moment itself (we can hear the scratch of the quills on the page). The film then dissolves onto the plans for their house, moving from one contract to another, or one materialist moment to another. The marriage is therefore narrated as a mere transaction in the film. Materialism here does not display anything but is used by Ivory so as to point at its own damaging role within intimacy.

At Oniton, the editing similarly implies some ironic mockery of the splendour of the house. After the first establishing shot, the camera isolates some of the paintings hanging on the wall, mimicking the supposed elegance of the premises with dissolves and a nice piece of music [1:23]. Henry tells Margaret that the identity of the characters portrayed is irrelevant: what matters is the mere fact of possessing, collecting and, granted, displaying them. Culture is reified here, though not as an aesthetic manifesto on Ivory's part, rather as a way to disclose some Wilcoxian materialist drift. A few minutes later, when Jacky makes a fool of herself by drinking and eating too much and inappropriately, the obvious fact that "she does not belong" there shows in the way her body is framed by somehow oblique lines, while Dolly and Charles are framed within the frame in the house, framed by perfectly horizontal and vertical lines [1:30]. They both appear as yet new portraits to be hung at Oniton, while the whole passage therefore narratively and visually testifies to the Wilcoxes' inability to connect and strike personal relationships.

Therefore, it may be argued that in the Merchant-Ivory productions materialism is a theme but also a formal device which is used to denounce social hypocrisies. Even if reflexivity or metafiction cannot be said to be core issues in their *Howards End*, the film sometimes interestingly and convincingly taps into intermediality to interrogate another form of materialism. The opening of the film is a case in point. On a black screen first appears a cut-in on André Derain's *La Danse* (1906). Over the unexpected sound of drums, Ivory zooms out so that the whole painting becomes visible, but precisely as a painting, the function of which is merely to illustrate the words "Merchant Ivory Productions present", as in a book. In the next shot, the title of the film appears progressively in Art Nouveau lettering. Even before the film begins, its aesthetic flaunts a mix of pictorial, musical and literary motifs. Then a wipe is used as a transition to the garden at Howards End—the curtains open and the show may begin, in

another intermedial, now theatrical, move. A specific adaptation option should be observed here, since the 1906 painting, the 1916 musical piece by Percy Grainger we hear next (*Bridal Lullaby*) and this intermedial aesthetic take us back to the original context of the novel as well as to the way early-twentieth-century England interrogated the reception of the arts.

Andrew Higson has a threefold interpretation of this opening: an historical fidelity to the novel, an artistic claim (“In effect, it says ‘this is Art’, and invites a sense of connoisseurship”; Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, 15”), and some cultural form of exoticism (“these opening images suggest a rich heterogeneity, a complex, challenging, hybrid cultural formation”; *Ibid.*, 154). He then suggests we should read the opening of the film as testifying to the ambivalence of the novel and the way *Howards End* may lend itself to multiple interpretations. These passages from his work on the Merchant-Ivory adaptations are more qualified than his recurrent denunciation of heritage style, for instance here: “It is a highly pictorialist use of the camera. Thus while the image clearly does have a narrational function, [...] it also insists on its presence precisely as image, as picture. [...] an image that is a carefully composed aesthetic object in its own right” (*ibid.*, 172). Such an approach of Ivory’s filming conjures up the notion of mannerism, when the film poetics become raw material in an attempt to invent new ways of filming based on intermediality and experiment with new *manners* of playing with the cinematic *matter*. We find here another possibility of working on the *materialism* of the film, in no way limited to an aesthetic of display, but which on the contrary looks back at the modernity of the novel and its context so as to provide some striking metacinematic innovations.

The opening sequence then resorts to dissolves and a large depth of field, in quite a “pictorialist” but also dramatic fashion, but then opens up to a *mise en abyme* of both the film screen and the film spectator. When Ruth looks at her family and at Helen, she turns the house into a film—from materialism to mannerism and then metafiction. Her vision also evokes Helen’s focalisation in the first pages of the book. Other scenes may be read in the same light, for instance when Helen and Leonard kiss on the boat [1:42]. We have the feeling that the background drifts away while the two characters are strikingly immobile, as with the “back-projection” technique, another metafilmic allusion in *Howards End*. The “Beethoven sequence” is another example, looking almost choreographed with a perfect synchronisation of some gestures with the music. Besides, the amplification and transformation of the music into a music over signals its incorporation into the film matter, or material, or again materialism, which more than ever cannot be reduced to “display”.

This is also how the Merchant-Ivory films can be said to be based on an aesthetic examination of separation, (dis)connection, individual and liberal aspirations, and of the way the medium might adapt and perform the questions at the heart of the books. To achieve this, the films pay close attention to the staging of bodies and the symbolic spatialization of individual, “personal relations” and family connections.

When Leonard comes back to Wickham Place, the camera slowly tracks back on him as he fingers the sword that will kill him [0:52]. We hear the clock ticking and see the fatal connections: Leonard turns around and is repeatedly shot with the sword behind him already cutting his throat in a violent horizontal line, first when he mentions Meredith. Too high literary and cultural ambitions will indeed bring him to his death, as heralded in this first example of the spatialization of individual fates. Marcia Landy writes that in *Howards End*, “as in their other Forster adaptations, the sense of place is tightly linked to character” (Marcia Landy, “Filmed Forster”, in David Bradshaw, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to E. M. Forster*, Cambridge: CUP, 2007, 235-253, 248). This also seems to be the case in the way individuals become their spatial environment to the point of blending with them. The first obvious example is that of Ruth and her walking scene in the first minutes of the film. “Trailing noiselessly over the lawn” (19), her character is first adapted according to the indications given by Helen in her letters (with her repetitions of “trail” for instance) in a synecdochical introduction. The image is very dark, and the sound of her green dress in the grass prevails. She is her dress, her dress is the grass, the grass is the garden, the garden is Howards End, so she is Howards End—from a synecdoche to a syllogism. Then her back and hair appear in shot but together with the flowers [0:01]: blending in with the décor, visually and thanks to the staging, Ruth *is* the place in this monochrome introduction. She even looks as one of the flowers herself (in the novel: “she was a wisp of hay, a flower”, 63). The dissolves add another dimension to this harmony. After her spectatorial position in front of the windows, she slowly passes by and gets off-screen. One of the servants seems to be looking at her, but we no longer can: Ruth is so much the place that she presides over its presentation and when she gets off-screen, she puts an end to both the scene and melody. The passage stands in stark contrast to the one in the London flat the Wilcoxes have rented. Ruth is filmed in the dark again but looks greyish, almost dead already, and in the opening shot she is hardly visible, as one prop among others already crushed by a materialism she hates [0:26]. She no longer harmoniously rules over her own space. In the next scene in the flat, she gets back in the light only when looking at the clock and its promise she might still catch a train to Hilton and her beloved home [0:38].

One should also notice the recurrent, almost systematic repetition of this spatialization of female characters in the film. Does the opening set the tone for the next heroines? Should they attempt to reach such a harmony? Is not this rather a visual celebration of female entrapment and reification, or even of the triumph of materialism? Among the most striking examples, let us mention the way Margaret's clothes are the very same colours and hues as the façade of the building where the Wilcoxes are staying [0:15]; the monochrome obliteration of Jacky in her flat [0:21]; Margaret's dress which seems to be made out of the same cloth as the curtains behind her [1:01]; her black and white outfit blending in with the whole restaurant [1:02]; her blue and beige, or sea and sand, clothes when on the beach with Tibby [1:52]; and her "visual invisibility" in the next scene in her husband's office due to the same strategy. This choice seems to underline women's invisibility, yet it may well be that in a typically Forsterian fashion it is through invisibility that these characters gain momentum and visual significance—another cinematic reconciliation of the seen and the unseen. Whatever the interpretation, which should also take into account the novel's complexities about the seen and the unseen, this other move beyond heritage testifies to the film's examination of symbolism and the spatialization of individuality, however ambivalent.

Ivory also resorts to a spatial symbolism of connection between individuals but also families. When Margaret discovers the garden and the house at Howards End, the music is not the only element connecting her to the first Mrs Wilcox and the opening of the film [1:17]. The slow, peaceful rhythm of the scene, first with the car driving away and literally screening her off from civilization for a few minutes by herself, adds to the connection. She looks through the same window, is shot from within so that she may be seen as already belonging to the garden, then enters the house and is shot with a large depth of field: she is already taking hold of the house and its empty rooms. Here too, her clothes are exactly the same colours as the wallpaper and painting. The same visual and spatial connection can be found when Margaret walks through the garden at Oniton, first filmed from behind, the image clearly conjuring that of Ruth in the first shots [1:24].

Equally spatialized are class relations, for instance when the camera goes up the stairs with the Schlegel sisters "bringing Leonard upstairs" (these are Margaret's words) [0:18], emphasizing what is socially at stake here, or when the reverse image and meaning can be found as Leonard runs down the stairs to flee from the house, going back to the abyss, as Forster would have it [0:59]. Wickham Place really stands as a central and meaningful symbolic connecting space. In the first scene there, the Schlegels first look from the back of the house to the Wilcoxes' flat [0:16], then Helen looks at Leonard from the front ("Is that young man for

us?”), before the scene concludes with other looks at the Wilcoxes from the back. The pivotal and connecting position of the Schlegels is spatialized through the topography of the house, and it comes as no surprise that the only scene there gathering the three families should be a disaster [0:59], taking place in this room where the Schlegels try their best to connect but to no avail most of the time.

Another scene worth analysing is the proposal scene in the staircase [1:06-1:09]. The stairs *and* the screen turn into an awkward space in which characters avoid each other and misconnect and miscommunicate more than ever. One could read the scene in terms of class and/or gender domination. Perhaps more interesting is the way the spatialization of awkwardness annihilates any possibility of romanticism and true emotions. Henry first goes past Margaret and moves off-camera, and then neither the ballroom nor the ceiling are to be seen. The splendour of the premises is not the subject here, but rather the autonomy of Margaret who leads their way downstairs and the exchange itself. Many shots-reverse shots are topographically but also symbolically motivated. Though almost reified into another rigid vase or then the bust on the landing, Margaret lets him enter her space and shot, the better to leave it after “the proposal”. She turns this space into a playing ground for miscommunication. Climbing up a couple of stairs to reach and kiss him (which she does not do in the book), she keeps claiming her visual independence by leaving the shot, the house, and the self-satisfied patriarch flattened against his rich collection of objects. Much more could be said on the scene, which is undoubtedly one of the most interesting ones as regards *visual* and *formal* adaptation of what the text means. The symbolic spatialization of body language and restraint becomes a major motif through which the film evokes the Forsterian ambiguous aesthetic of the body, another dimension in which the film examines the ambivalence of the original “only connect” credo.