

# Theatre of Operations: a comparison in film

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The purpose of this essay is to make a comparison between two films, one British and the other Japanese. Both films, *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean, 1946) and *Gekashitsu* (dir. Bandō Tamasaburō, 1992), portray a love affair between a married woman and a doctor. The treatment of the love affair is, however, quite different in some ways, and it seemed to me that it would be useful and illuminating to analyse the differences and similarities.

Though over forty years separate the films, both are based on literary works. These works too made their appearance almost forty years apart, and were in some ways different. *Brief Encounter*, filmed in black and white, is based on a play by Noel Coward, and was thus originally written for the stage, while *Gekashitsu*, made luxuriantly in colour, is drawn from a short story by the Japanese novelist Izumi Kyōka. My purpose in examining the two stories, in both their film and non-film versions, is consequently threefold: first to look at the transformation into film; second to compare the films; and lastly to see what cultural assumptions and preferences they might reveal.

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Noel Coward (1899-1973), who wrote the play on which *Brief Encounter* is based, was a man of many parts, most of them connected with the theatre. Known as a witty singer and songwriter, he also acted from an early age, and wrote a number of comic plays. Much of his

## Theatre of Operations

theatrical work deals, in the manner of Oscar Wilde, with humorous, sometimes farcical, representations of the wealthy classes. But Coward, quintessentially English, did not look at his society from the outside, but from the inside, and his work is therefore less revealing than that of the Irish Wilde. *Still Life*, however, differs in some degree from Coward's best-known plays in that its main characters are middle, not upper, class, and that it takes place not in private drawing rooms and hotel suites, but in the refreshment room of a railway station. The idea of a railway station is the subject of great mirth in Wilde's last play, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), while in *Still Life* the location is sober and tragically serious.

This is not to say that *Still Life* lacks any comic elements. The romance between Laura Jesson, an ordinary married woman, and Alec Harvey, the doctor, from their chance first meeting to their final separation, is played out against a background of noisy interference that includes not only the sound of passing trains, but the badinage of other customers and the station staff. One part of the play is dominated by a couple of troublesome young soldiers, as the closing scene is by the gossiping of an acquaintance of Laura's. A contrast is readily set up between the constraint and secrecy of the liaison between Alec and Laura and the freer ways of those around them. The working-class characters are made to seem both livelier and more open than their middle-class counterparts, whose freedom is constricted by a sense of responsibility to their families, and also perhaps to society at large. The tragedy of the lovers' situation, and their strong self-denial, is not diminished but reinforced by this.

In portraying the different classes, Coward shows, as always, a sharp ear for the revealing line in conversation. Myrtle Bagot, who runs the refreshment room, is a wholly convincing figure of her type — flirtatious, bossy and affected. Her affectations range from changes in pronunciation

## Theatre of Operations

("faine" as given in the text) to revised construction ("I do not know to what you do refer," she says more than once, the unnecessary preposition shift indicative of hypercorrection). At the same time Myrtle, though scolding to her cowed assistant Beryl, and occasionally to her admirer, the ticket collector Albert Godby, embodies freedom and independence. At the beginning of Scene II, she recounts to the amazed Beryl how she left her husband and struck out on her own successfully (13). Three romances are played out through the action on stage: one between Myrtle and Albert; another between Beryl and the cheeky Stanley, who sells refreshments on the platform; and lastly that between Laura and Alec, the central figures in the drama. The first two are happily pursued, while the last ends in a painful separation, in recognition of the impossibility of the lovers' situation. The interdiction placed by society, or by Alec and Laura themselves, on their relationship, means that it cannot grow and deepen, but must be eventually abandoned. This is implied in the 'still life' of the title: the love between them is stillborn.

Despite being comfortably middle-class, the condition in which Alec and Laura find themselves is one of deprivation. The grasping for knowledge of each other that their conversation shows (15-19 especially) is all the more moving because of this. As previously observed, it forms a contrast to the uninhibited banter of the other characters on stage, which in turn heightens our awareness of the social pressures on the couple. Laura and Alec are themselves highly aware of their situation, and while yielding to their urge to meet and be together, never forget their joint and separate responsibilities, to their respective families, and by extension to the wider society. In this sense, their behaviour might be read as a model to those around them. Nonetheless, after some doubts and hesitations, Alec and Laura do engage in an adulterous relationship (Alec has the keys to a friend's flat, and Laura follows him there at the end of Scene III),

## Theatre of Operations

though only after long preliminary acquaintance (six months have passed since their first meeting). When circumstances foreclose on this (the friend comes back unexpectedly), in Scene IV, they recognise the impossibility of continuing and decide to separate, which they do in Scene V (Alec has accepted a job in South Africa).

Although the love felt between Alec and Laura is mutual and reciprocal, it is evidently Laura more than Alec who is sensitive to social pressure, perhaps owing to her position as a woman. As early as Scene II she confesses to feeling guilty, which Alec dismisses (15):

LAURA. Do you feel guilty at all? I do.

ALEC. (*smiling*). Guilty?

LAURA. You ought to more than me, really -- you neglected your work this afternoon.

ALEC. I worked this morning -- a little relaxation never did anyone any harm. Why should either of us feel guilty?

LAURA. I don't know -- a sort of instinct -- as though we were letting something happen that oughtn't to happen.

In Scene IV, when Laura is upset over the humiliation of being discovered with Alec at his friend's flat, she returns to this even as he tries to reassure her (33):

ALEC...this unfortunate damnable incident -- it was just bad luck. It couldn't affect us really, you and me -- we know the truth -- we know we really love each other -- that's all that matters.

LAURA. It isn't all that matters -- other things matter too, self-respect matters, and decency -- I can't go on any longer.

Interestingly, and significantly, Alec turns away from Laura, speaking with his back to her, when soon after this he breaks the news of his departure (34). His inability to 'face' her at this point suggests a male integrity built on personal honour, and his sense of shame is mainly towards Laura, though he claims to have felt guilty about their relationship as well. The gesture of turning away can quite often be found at key moments, usually of truth-telling or confession, in Japanese theatre and

## Theatre of Operations

film, and invites further analysis for cultural comparison, though there is not space to do that here.

Noel Coward himself played Alec Harvey in the first production of this play in London in 1936. He was also enlisted to rewrite the script for the film version, directed by David Lean under the title *Brief Encounter* and released a decade later. While the film, now regarded as a classic, has been widely examined and discussed, often in relation to the work of the director, no more than passing reference is usually made to the original play on which it is based. However, there are some important and interesting differences between them. At the simplest level, these point up the differences between the two theatrical media, play and film. In the play there is only one location, the refreshment room at the station, and the development of the drama depends heavily on language, which evokes the action indirectly. In the film, on the other hand, many locations have been incorporated, so that we see the relationship between Alec and Laura played out, not offstage, but in front of our eyes, in restaurant and cinema, in the street and in the country. Other alterations include the fact that the film begins at the end of the story, when the lovers have already separated, and is largely told as a monologue by Laura, whose voice-over account links the multiple scenes and incidents into a continuous narrative. The whole film is thus an extended flashback. Laura's family is introduced, and the film consequently becomes her story, in a memorably vital performance by Celia Johnson, Alec's more subdued role being played by Trevor Howard.

Richard Dyer, in a lengthy essay, observes that the "cut-glass" Home Counties accents of the leading actors in the film may be less alienating to average viewers now, after fifty years, than they might have been a generation ago (32). (Interestingly, an updated, more contemporary and socially aware remake of this film was released in the 1960s, yet it lacks

## Theatre of Operations

the austere appeal of the early version.) His discussion of the film's technique is wide-ranging and acute, but he only refers to the play in passing (43). Among the less noticed, and perhaps less immediately noticeable, points of contrast between the play and the film, are that the film considerably telescopes the time-frame of the story (the action of the play lasts a year, while in the film, according to Dyer, 15, it is only seven weeks) and that in the film no sexual relationship takes place. In *Still Life*, it is quite clear that Alec and Laura meet weekly in his friend's apartment for about two months, though we do not see this. In *Brief Encounter*, the lovers are surprised by Alec's friend returning on Laura's very first visit, and only minutes after her arrival. The reason for this difference is probably that the adultery would have offended postwar mores: in the play it could be implied without being shown, while in the film it could only have been shown.

There are many subsidiary aspects of the play and film that might be compared — the addition of extraneous characters to fill out the more varied scenery of the film, together with the reduced roles for the secondary romances that make up much of the play — but the overwhelming impression is that the story in the film has become entirely Laura's story. The film begins and ends with her at home, with Alec as a necessary adjunct to the action in between. But, regardless of the cinematic foregrounding, we can perhaps say that it is Laura — the “woman taken in adultery” — who represents, traditionally, the greater threat to the social fabric, and hence potentially invites the greater condemnation. It is of course notable that Alec and Laura do not finally follow their desires, and are not guided by them to a destructive conclusion, but draw back, allowing themselves to be led instead by their innate decency and commonsense, thus reinforcing the values of the middle class they represent.

## Theatre of Operations

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The story of *Gekashitsu*, as both the original story by Izumi Kyōka and the film directed by Bandō Tamasaburō are entitled, runs in complete opposition to this. There is nothing restrained or reasonable in the encounter between the leading characters, the Countess Kifune and Dr Takamine, when they are fortuitously brought together. The main action, which takes place in the operating theatre of a hospital, leads to the deaths of both these persons. Their encounter, much briefer than that of Alec and Laura in terms of the amount of time they spend together, is also much more drawn out in terms of the length of time that they cherish longing in their hearts for one another. Like Alec and Laura, they also meet by chance.

The story “Gekashitsu” by Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939) is extremely short, and runs to only ten pages in its translated version. It is ostensibly related by a friend of Dr Takamine, and begins with the friend’s arrival at a hospital to witness an operation which Dr Takamine is to perform on the Countess Kifune. The operation is to be carried out in the presence of the Countess’s husband and some other aristocrats, together with a number of nurses and assistants. The narrator is a painter, and has purportedly been invited by the surgeon as a witness, in his artistic capacity. Before the surgery begins, the Countess is asked for her consent to administer an anaesthetic. This she refuses, explaining that she fears mentioning a “secret in [her] heart” under the influence of the sleeping drug (24). Several attempts are made to persuade her, but she steadfastly rejects them. Eventually it is decided that the operation will be performed without an anaesthetic. When the young surgeon begins, he asks the Countess if she is in pain, which she denies. Then, in a sudden passionate outburst, she tells him that she is indifferent to pain “Because it’s you. You !” (27), after which she snatches the scalpel from the doctor’s hand

## Theatre of Operations

and stabs herself in the heart. Later that day, as we learn from the remainder of the story, the doctor kills himself as well.

The scene then reverts to a spring day nine years earlier, when the Count and Countess are viewing the azaleas in Koishikawa in Tokyo, in company with their servants and retainers, and are seen there by Takamine and his friend. At this time, Takamine catches a glimpse of the younger Countess, and falls in love with her at first sight, as she evidently does with him. The two young men, who are students, also overhear two other men of a lower class conversing vulgarly upon the desirability of the Countess and two of her companions. According to the story, Takamine never mentioned the Countess again from this time until their fateful meeting in the hospital (30).

This very short written text was made into a relatively short (50 minutes) film, that nonetheless enjoyed considerable success when it was released in Japan in 1992. It was unusual for a feature film to be so short, but the distributors' confidence was repaid by regular, almost entirely female, audiences. The part of the Countess was sensitively rendered by Yoshinaga Sayuri, while the role of the doctor was played by the slightly less experienced Katō Masaya. That the film was directed by one of Japan's best-known 'actresses', the Kabuki *onnagata* performer Tamasaburō, gave it additional appeal, and ensured that it would be imbued with a traditional aesthetic.

Though of course the story has been somewhat extended in the film, with a few more scenes and incidents than are contained in the written version, it is remarkably faithful to the original in structure and in spirit. The poetic references to colour, especially to red and white, in the story, translate well to the screen, since they work through the visual imagination. The first part of both the film and story is almost monochrome, until the blood trickles from the doctor's first incision, poetically releasing



## Theatre of Operations

passion. The second, though chronologically earlier, section is replete with the bright colours of the flowers. Both parts, but especially the latter, are punctuated with long silent pauses, which seem natural within Japanese theatrical tradition, and hence also cinematic convention. There is, too, a high degree of ceremoniousness in the behaviour of the characters which speaks of this tradition. Close attention has been paid to the visual arrangement of the actors on the screen, where they appear to have been placed before the audience as if they were on stage, undoubtedly under the director's influence. In seeming occasionally like a play, *Gekashitsu* differs greatly from the English film, which makes much more varied use of camera angles.

Like *Brief Encounter*, the film of *Gekashitsu* has a framing device, in the form of conversations with an elderly park keeper, with which it begins and to which it finally returns. It is a much richer visual experience than its monochrome English counterpart but, beyond the obvious differences in presentation, the salient difference between the two films lies in the plot. Where Laura and Alec agree to separate, and thereby renounce their desire for one another, the Countess and Takamine sacrifice even their lives to the irresistible force of mutual passion. The Japanese story is therefore obviously much more romantic and intense, and seems to set individual feeling above and beyond the restraints of social obligation. This may seem at first surprising, though it has many precedents in, for example, the stories told in Kabuki drama, where *shinjū*, the joint suicide of lovers, is a major subject in certain types of play. By contrast, even the most famous lovers' suicide in English literature, that of Romeo and Juliet, occurs not by mutual consent, but by accident and through misunderstanding.

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It is not that the self-destructive impulse that so entirely dominates

## Theatre of Operations

the Japanese film is absent from the British one. There is a moment in *Brief Encounter* (which also occurs offstage in the play, 44) when, just after Alec has finally departed, Laura hears an approaching train and rushes impulsively out onto the platform. The implication is that, very briefly, she considers killing herself. Indeed she has already said to Alec “I want to die” at the thought of separation (as also in the play, 41). The moment is oddly, and perhaps intentionally, reminiscent of the suicide of Anna Karenina. But remembering this only serves to underscore Laura’s limitations, and the play directions always emphasise her ordinariness. So, although she has been elevated to the status of tragic heroine by the silver screen, Laura Jesson remains a figure of her time and place. She is not given to reckless or passionate abandon, nor is she a bored or flirtatious woman who might wilfully destroy her own life or the lives of those around her. She is no Anna Karenina, or Emma Bovary, or Manon Lescaut, but a decent ordinary English married woman.

It is relevant, perhaps, to note in this connection how Noel Coward, though something of a dandy, at the same time espoused the most traditional British values, evidenced for example by his entertaining troops in wartime and later becoming a friend of the Royal Family. His pragmatic attitude to life is well caught in the diary entry he made on hearing of the death of Marilyn Monroe, where he decries the fact that “a beautiful, famous and wealthy young woman of thirty-six should so capriciously kill herself for want of a little self-discipline and horse-sense” (282). There is an impatience here with loss of self-control.

In the tormented aesthetic of the Japanese story, a certain tradition can be found. Not only is the story underwritten, in terms of its stylised presentation in the film, by traditional theatre, but its plot and action locate it close to this as well. While Donald Keene suggests that some elements in the story may have been inspired by European Romanticism

## Theatre of Operations

(*Fiction*, 119-20), the Countess's conflict between duty or obligation (*giri*) and the expression of natural human feeling (*ninjō*), leading to a violent resolution, has many precedents in Kabuki. Keene notes too that "various stories by Izumi Kyōka provided the backbone of the Shimpa repertory" (*Drama*, 396), referring to the new type of theatre that developed from Kabuki in the Meiji period yet continued to have much in common with it. Further, the focus of the written story places it easily alongside the more modern Aestheticist (*tanbi-shugi*) writers, whom Kyōka is known to have inspired. An aesthetic of claustrophobically intense beauty with strong undertones of sado-masochism informs much of the work of Mishima Yukio and Kawabata Yasunari. We can also understand from this why Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, regarded as minor and eccentric by Western critics, has always enjoyed popularity in Japan, and was evidently the first of his plays to be translated. This is not to say that such an aesthetic is absent from British art (it is a notable feature of experimental cinema in recent decades, especially in the films of Ken Russell, Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway), but rather that it occupies a much less central place.

In keeping with the general conventions of British theatre and fiction, a good deal of effort has been taken to provide a realistic setting for *Brief Encounter*. Both the situation and the behaviour of the characters seem possible or likely to the viewer. In *Gekashitsu*, by contrast, scarcely any circumstantial detail is provided, and there is much about the action that is not only improbable but melodramatic and absurd. The Countess and Takamine fall in love after only sighting each other briefly, and evidently do not even speak until their second encounter nine years later. The absence of a sexual, or indeed any other kind of described, relationship between them in the intervening period may be intended to emphasise the purity of their longing for one another. It may also be that the details of their relationship during that time have been considered

## Theatre of Operations

artistically unnecessary, and deliberately left to the imagination of the viewer, another common feature of traditional art.

Although there are some major differences in presentation, especially with regard to verisimilitude, it has to be said that *Gekashitsu*, like *Brief Encounter*, is essentially a woman's story. The viewpoint of the story is meant to be that of Takamine's friend, but it is the Countess Kifune who dominates the film. It is she who provokes the action and controls it, not only in refusing the anaesthetic despite the blandishments of those around her, but also in initiating the course of self-destruction that inevitably follows. And it is she who first resolves to die, converting her passive female status (at the time she is literally supine) into a strength, and leaving Takamine with virtually no choice except to follow after and sacrifice himself.

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There is much that might be investigated and discussed about the social differences, both general and particular, between the England of Noel Coward and the Japan of Izumi Kyōka as represented in the films. The salient difference between the films, however, lies in the way that the lovers in each case resolve their situation – by suicide or separation – and to that extent their actions can be taken to be emblematic. Clearly the force of repression in the older story is much greater, allowing less scope to the leading characters, and fewer alternatives, so that the course that they adopt is more extreme. The British story, on the other hand, takes a predominantly rational approach, and upholds reason and reasonableness, values that are in some ways typically English.

In both cases, nonetheless, we are invited to feel sympathy for the lovers' situation, to identify with them and somehow to share their difficulties. In this respect the films converge, and it is notable that both romances are played out to the music of Rachmaninov. A minor differ-

## Theatre of Operations

ence between them is that the Japanese doctor is not only younger than the woman, but also unmarried. Yet what brings the lovers together, and ignites the spark of feeling in them, is the same in both the stories. Laura's relationship with Alec begins when she allows him to remove a piece of grit from her eye. She allows him to do this because he tells her that he is a doctor. The Countess Kifune's passion erupts when Dr Takamine begins the operation, because she finds the contact unbearable, not physically but emotionally. Both of these incidents occur in public, with the full sanction of the third parties who observe them: a doctor is virtually the only person whom society allows to touch the wife of another man, or a woman that he doesn't know.

*Note:* There are several dangers involved in a comparison like this, and of which I am well aware. In the first place, there is the likelihood of placing too much stress on differences, and not enough on similarities, simply because differences are more interesting to deal with. At the same time there is the danger of being too reductionist, of creating a binary opposition where the idea of a continuum might be a more useful concept. There is also the possibility that the discussion might ramify so widely into other fields, like sociology and history, as to become unwieldy (though ideally perhaps it should do this). Despite these shortcomings and limitations, I have found some interest in these materials among the students with whom I studied them in a special reading course at Ferris. After examining the films and stories in a variety of ways, I asked the students to choose which of the two main stories they preferred. My impression from their choices was that these seemed to tally substantially with the degree of Westernisation each individual revealed in her attitudes and thinking.

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Theatre of Operations

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