“In the Key of Loss”

Aciman, Guadagnino, and Call Me By Your Name

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Abstract

This article addresses a particular example of the intersection of literature and cinema in the film *Call Me By Your Name*, made by Luca Guadagnino and based on the novel of the same title by André Aciman, and the themes of nostalgia and loss in the work of both. The film results from the encounter, in its production and in a large number of retrospective discussions, between the cosmopolitan writer André Aciman and the Italian director Luca Guadagnino who, while attentive to global issues such as the trans-Mediterranean migration which features in the film, is very much grounded in his home region of northern Italy. The (rather differently figured) Jewish and homosexual identities of the two protagonists in the novel and the film are also addressed.

Keywords

Aciman – Guadagnino – *Call Me By Your Name* – nostalgia – exile

Both world literature and world cinema have been defined descriptively and also in more ambitious ways. The descriptive definition often seems to mean little more than literary and cinematic production which, in either its origins or its resonance, goes beyond the European and/or Anglosphere. Often, as in a standard reference work such as the *Directory of World Cinema* series (University of Chicago Press), the frame of reference is the national state (or occasionally a broader region such as Latin America). The more conceptually ambitious definitions refer, in each case, to transnational or cosmopolitan dimensions of the work. The Brazilian and British-based cinema theorist Lúcia Nagib (34) referred to “a world made of interconnected cinemas” and the editors’ introduc-

tion to *Theorizing World Cinema* defends a “polycentric approach” which points to the way in which “cinema both shapes and responds to the philosophical, cultural and political effects of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism” (Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah xvii).

Discussions of globalisation have increasingly questioned the idea of sharp divisions between the global and the local, focusing instead on the interplay between different levels or scales. This article addresses a particular example of the intersection of literature and cinema in the encounter, in the production of a film and a large number of retrospective discussions referred to below, between the cosmopolitan writer André Aciman and the Italian director Luca Guadagnino who, while attentive to global issues such as the trans-Mediterranean migration which features in the film, is very much grounded in his home region of northern Italy.

Aciman's novel *Call Me By Your Name* was well received on its publication in 2007 but gained a vastly increased readership after the release of the 2017 film adaptation, directed by Guadagnino and with an Oscar-winning screenplay by James Ivory, who in 1987 scripted the film of E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice*, a novel about love between men which Forster wrote between 1913–4 and which was published posthumously in 1971.¹ *Call Me By Your Name* is a story of sexual awakening, as Oliver, a young American philosopher working on a book on the pre-Socratics, comes to stay for the summer with a family whose holiday home is in the Italian countryside. The father is a professor (of an unidentified discipline in the novel, and of Antiquity in the film adaptation), the son Elio a musically-gifted and intellectually-precocious seventeen-year-old. The novel charts the slow, shy progress towards the consummation of Elio's desire – his want – for Oliver. It tells the story exclusively from Elio's point of view, in the first person, and the reader is made aware from the outset that the events of that summer are being recalled retrospectively: “I shut my eyes, say the word, and I'm back in Italy ...,” Elio writes (Aciman *Call Me* 3).

Aciman is the author of numerous explicitly nostalgic essays and an autobiographical memoir, *Out of Egypt* (1994), describing his youth in Alexandria up to his Jewish family's forced departure in 1965 for Europe (Italy and France) and later the US. Alexandria's distinctive position in relation to Cairo and the rest of Egypt is a familiar trope and even, one might say, a nostotrope, inaugurated by mourning of the loss, over several centuries, of its celebrated library. In the twentieth century, Alexandria has been documented in Greek by the poet Con-

1 Guadagnino was initially approached as a consultant, with Ivory expected to direct the film.

stantine Cavafy, and in English by Lawrence Durrell, a press attaché in Cairo and Alexandria during ww2, in *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60); the first volume, *Justine*, is based on his second wife, whom he met there. Durrell, in *Clea*, calls Alexandria "the capital of memory" (11), and Aciman makes this the title of an essay in his *False Papers* (Aciman 9). As he recalls, even the Western Harbour used to be called "the Harbor of Safe Return, Portus Eunostos ..." (Aciman *False Papers* 7).

As a site of nostalgia (as ports often tend to be), Alexandria might be compared to another port: Trieste, on the other side of the Mediterranean memorialized by, amongst many others, Jan Morris. In *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, Morris describes what she terms "the Trieste effect" as the "opaque seaport" of her vision, "so full of sweet melancholy, illustrat[ing] not just my adolescent emotions of the past, but my life-long preoccupations too" (4). Trieste is, Morris writes, "a city made for exiles" (74), and there is a thread in her account (as a man who transitioned to a woman) which links the themes of exile and melancholy to her own life-changes: "I write of exiles in Trieste, but I have generally felt myself an exile from normality, and now I feel myself one of those exiles from time" (Morris 186).

Aciman's boyhood experience of exile had more directly political causes, though his work is equally tuned to a melancholic register. The position of the substantial Jewish population in Egypt (c. 75,000), many with Egyptian citizenship, was overshadowed by the fact that Israel and Egypt were officially at war from 1948 to 1979. Egypt had joined in the Arab attack on Israel immediately after its declaration of independence in May 1948 and Israel bombed Cairo in the same month. In 1954 it conducted a campaign in Egypt with the aim of discrediting local political forces, destabilising the country and encouraging the British to remain in the Suez Canal zone. Following the nationalisation of the Canal in 1956 by the Nasser government which had come to power four years earlier, Israel took a leading part in the Anglo-French attack which put the Canal out of action for nearly six months. This was followed by a government proclamation that "all Jews are Zionists and enemies of the state," and many were forced to leave the country. The Six Day War of 1967, beginning with the Israeli invasion of Sinai, was followed by a further wave of expulsions, in which around half the remaining Jewish population left for Israel and the rest for France and North and South America. The writer and academic Gabriel Josipovici, born in France in 1940, who lived in and near Cairo until 1956, having survived the Nazi occupation of France, records that, while his mother always stressed that there was less anti-Semitism in Egypt than among the French petite bourgeoisie (Josipovici 119),

... there was no “back home,” no mother country, however alien, for those whose families were, if not Egyptian, at least part of the fabric of Egypt. And for the Jewish families, no matter how assimilated or how Anglicised, there was the further sense that although this was the only country they could call their own they did not exactly belong to it.

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The Acimans, ineligible for Egyptian citizenship but remaining until 1965, were Sephardic Jews, speaking mainly French but also English (the young André attended British schools), Italian, Greek, Arabic and Ladino (the Romance language spoken by Sephardic Jews). Aciman remained angry at the expulsions, rebuking Barack Obama for not mentioning them in a speech in Cairo in which he attacked anti-Semitic holocaust deniers, the treatment of Palestinians by Israel and, in Egypt itself, the persecution of Coptic Christians (Aciman “The Exodus”), though he has also expressed his view that the Egypt of his childhood was a world well lost.

Aciman’s most explicitly nostalgic passage in *Out of Egypt* comes at its close as he describes a walk on his last night before emigrating:

... I knew, as I touched the damp, grainy surface of the seawall, that I would always remember this night, that in years to come I would remember sitting here, swept with confused longing as I listened to the water lapping the giant boulders beneath the promenade and watched the children head towards the shore in a winding, lambent procession. I wanted to come back tomorrow night, and the night after, and the one after that as well, sensing that what made leaving so painful was the knowledge that there would never be another night like this, that I would never eat soggy cakes along the coast road in the evening, not this year or any other year, nor feel the baffling, sudden beauty of that moment when, if only for an instant, I had caught myself longing for a city I never knew I loved.

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He records his father saying earlier: “It’s a small city, but I hate to lose her.” (Aciman *Out of Egypt* 322)

The word “tomorrow” in his text, rather than the more obvious “the next night,” puts the event into the present, and this may be a clue to the reason why the book is not altogether explicit in its use of nostalgic language. Although Aciman rejects the idea of imitating Proust’s fluid tenses, “the compulsive oscillations between imperfect, present perfect, simple past, and future anterior” (Aciman *The Proust Project* xiv), something of this enters into his prose. There

is also the ambivalence between letting go and mourning, illustrated by two remarks Aciman cites by his great-uncle known as Vili. On one occasion he resists the invitation to speak about the past: "That was rubbish. I live in the present" (Aciman *Proust* 3) and a later remark: "It was the end of the end. The end of an era, the end of a world. Everything fell apart after that" (31).

Aciman did in fact return to Alexandria on a visit in 1995, which he frames in terms of Proustian memory. He returned to a pastry shop but found that "The idea of eating cake to summon my past seems too uncanny and ridiculous."

... I had come not to recover memories, nor even to recognize those I'd disfigured, nor to toy with the thought that I'd ever live there again; I had come to bury the whole thing, to get it out of my system

ACIMAN *False Papers* 9

I am, it finally occurs to me, doing the most typical thing a Jew could do. I've come back to Egypt the way only Jews yearn to go back to places they couldn't wait to flee.

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In his 2000 essay "In Search of Proust," based on an article published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1998, Aciman relates that at the age of fifteen he was told by his father in Paris that Proust was a writer he should read. The following day, reading *Du côté de chez Swann*, he felt that "in the eighty-odd pages I had read that day I had rediscovered my entire childhood in Alexandria" (*False Papers* 68). Much later, he reviewed translations and biographies of Proust in 2002 and 2005 and edited *The Proust Project*, in which he suggests that Proust "allows us – indeed invites us and ultimately compels us – to graft, to 'bookmark' our own past onto his" (*Proust* xi).

Aciman writes of a summer recalled by Proust in which the twenty-four-year-old Proust and Reynaldo Hahn spent an idyllic vacation in Brittany, during which Proust started writing a novel which eventually mutated into *Recherche*. "That summer," Aciman writes, "everything – love, writing, friendship – had come together" ("Proust Regained"). Aciman writes of his own, similar experience of a summer day in Alexandria with his Italian tutor, who quoted Homer's *Odyssey* in Italian and offered also to teach him Greek: "For the first time in my life I knew exactly what I wanted to do this summer, and every other summer after that" (*Out of Egypt* 290). Such elements are shaping forces in *Call Me By Your Name*.

In his two collections of essays – *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory* (2000) and *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (2011) – and in the edited volume *Let-*

ters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss, compiled in 1999 – Aciman has reflected, as systematically and explicitly as perhaps any contemporary writer, on the lineaments of nostalgia; he has been, we might say, an anatomist of nostalgia. In the opening essay of *False Papers*, entitled “Alexandria: The Capital of Memory,” in which Aciman describes his return to Alexandria after many years, he wrote that the place is itself “the site of nostalgia”:

Not far from the [archaeological] dig lies the Western Harbor, which the ancients used to call the Harbor of Safe Return, Portus Eunostos, from the Ancient Greek *eu*, meaning good, safe, and *nostos*, meaning return. Nostalgia is the ache to return, to come home; *nostophobia*, the fear of returning; *nostomania*, the obsession with going back; *nostography*, writing about return.

False Papers 7

In Aciman’s writings “nostalgia” is always self-reflexive – the “ache to return” by definition separated, in time and place and through the work of reflection, from that which is called home. “The site of nostalgia,” he writes in the essay “Pensione Eolo,” “is nostalgia itself. The site of nostalgia is writing and speculating and thinking about nostalgia” (*False Papers* 141). As in Proust, “Nostalgia is rooted in the text itself” (*False Papers* 144): In this argument, nostalgia and nostography are one. Aciman’s work would thus seem to fit with exactitude Svetlana Boym’s model of “reflective nostalgia,” whose focus is “not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and the passage of time” (Boym 73). She contrasts this with what she calls “restorative nostalgia,” which stresses *nostos* (rather than *algia*, the longing itself) and “attempts a transhistorical restoration of the lost home” (22). Yet Boym’s dualism is to a significant extent blurred or confounded by Aciman’s understanding of the paradoxical – even perverse – nature of nostalgic feeling: “The Egypt I craved to return to was not the one I knew, or couldn’t wait to flee, but the one where I learned to invent being *somewhere else, someone else*” (Aciman *Alibis* 175).

“I think that I cannot write unless there was something lost,” Aciman has said in interview with the Irish writer Colm Tóibín, “and if I don’t have something lost, I have to manufacture the loss, in order to make myself write. So I cannot write towards the future, I can only write towards the past ...” (Aciman and Tóibín 6). In Aciman’s reconfigured version of *The Odyssey*, Ulysses, “suspecting that once he’s returned to Ithaca he may miss his days as an immortal in Calypso’s arms, determines never to leave Calypso and chooses immortality

instead." He thus realizes that "nostalgia is not some sort of restless energy that propels him homeward, but that nostalgia is his home, the way that, in exile, only paradox makes sense."

The paradoxical, or contrafactual, is what defines Aciman's relationships to the questions of memory, time, change, self, love – all read in "the key of loss," as he puts it (Aciman *False Papers* 39). The "contrafactual mood" (Aciman *Alibis* 97) or "imperfect conditional" represents the combination of past and future which is, for Aciman, something like a home, or a "comfort zone" – a connection driven by the "hope of restoring a remembered past in an imagined future" (*Alibis* 97). While many of his essays could be defined as travel writings, Aciman suggests that his motivation is not to capture present experiences of places for their own sake, in their immediacy, but to log them for a future time in which they will have become the past.

At times this "contrafactual mood" is represented as the condition of the exile: at others, Aciman depicts it as a personal pathology. As he writes of the time he spent, as a teenager, in Paris after the family's departure from Alexandria to Rome, "What drove my brother insane were precisely these in-a-week-from-now-we'll-be-in-Rome-remembering-everything-we-said-and-did-in-Paris antics of mine" (*False Papers* 58). In representing it, with whatever degree of self-irony, as a neurosis, Aciman's writing recalls early understandings of "nostalgia" as a medical condition; for its first theorist, the medical student Johannes Hofer, writing in the seventeenth century, "nostalgia" represents an affliction of the imagination which is caused by a mental image of the native land which results in a melancholic state. One major difference, however, between this early model of nostalgia and that to which Aciman holds is that the "return home" (which for Hofer was the condition of cure) is no longer a possibility, because neither the place nor the self has remained identical with itself.

There are echoes here of Heraclitus's "flux" theory, and Heraclitus is a significant figure for Aciman, invoked throughout *Call Me By Your Name*. In his essay "Pensione Eolo," Aciman refers to Heraclitus's concept of the "palintropic" – that which "turns again – which keeps turning" – "a going back to oneself, a flipping back to oneself, a sort of systemic *renversement* reminiscent of the back-sprung reflex Homeric bow" (*False Papers* 139–40). It could be added that the bow, which must be pulled in opposite directions in order to function, represents the idea of the unity of opposites, of birth and death, a paradox to which its Greek name – *biós*, or "life" – points: "The bow's name is life, but its work is death," Heraclitus writes. "A palintropic reading of the world," Aciman writes, "assumes that one is not quite like others and that to understand others, to be with others, to love others and be loved by them, one must think *other* thoughts

than those that come naturally to one. ... I might as well be someone else" (*False Papers* 140). Time, too, is palintropic: "What we ultimately remember is not the past but ourselves in the past imagining the future. And, frequently, what we look forward to is not the future but the past restored" (*Alibis* 175). "Displacement" and contradiction lie at the heart of all these models of being (or not-being) in the world. It is not altogether clear from Aciman's writings whether he sees this condition as the particular predicament of those who have experienced exile, or whether there is a more fully existential, or psychoanalytic, sense that the *heimlich* is always shadowed by the *unheimlich* and that we are never at one with ourselves.

Aciman's presentation of the paradoxes and double binds of nostalgia intersect, in striking ways, with the writings of the British psychoanalyst, critic and essayist Adam Phillips. Phillips has written at some length about a preoccupation that also recurs in Aciman's writing, and that is closely linked to the question of nostalgia – that of "the other life, the life not lived": the poet Randall Jarrell's line from "A Girl in the Library," "The ways we miss our lives are life" is a repeated refrain in Phillips' writings. For Phillips, the sense of "missing out" is part of the human condition: we learn as children, he writes, "to live somewhere between the lives we have and the lives we would like" (Phillips xi). "We share our lives with the people we have failed to be" (xiii). The conditions of modernity however, make it ever more intense:

Once the promise of immortality, of being chosen, was displaced by the promise of more life – the promise, as we say, of getting more out of life – the unlive life became a haunting presence in a life legitimated by nothing more than the desire to live it. For modern people, stalked by their choices, the good life is a life lived to the full. We become obsessed, in a new way, by what is missing in our lives; and by what sabotages the pleasure that we seek ... So we may need to think of ourselves as always living a double life, the one that we wish for and the one that we practise; the one that never happens and the one that keeps happening.

PHILLIPS xvii

"There is nothing more obscure," Phillips writes, "than the relationship between the lived and the unlive life." For Phillips, the unlive life is the life lived in fantasy, the wished-for life (or lives) (Phillips xvii). For Aciman, it is the condition of exile that creates this sense of "the other life, the one that we never live but conjure up when the one we have is perhaps not the one we want": in Alexandria, he imagines this other self, this double, "who never left Egypt or ever lost ground and who, on nights such as these, still dreams of the world abroad and

of faraway America, the way I, over the years, have longed for life right here whenever I find I don't fit anywhere else" (*False Papers* 20–21). "Losing ground" is a carefully chosen phrase here, pointing up the ways in which the loss of geographical place – of property or homeland – underlies the idiom used to express the loss of advantage, the failure to advance.

How can the story of a self be written – whether as autobiography or nostography – when the lived life is so shaped and inhabited by its unlived counterpart, or counterparts? For Aciman, the question of nostalgia is intimately bound up with the nature of memoir-writing. "Memoir" has, in recent decades, recovered its original French double meaning as "memory" and self-narrative (and here we might return to Aciman's idea that "nostalgia" and "nostography" become one). Aciman notes that questions of truth and falsehood are not simple when memory and the double-self are concerned. "All memoirists lie," Aciman writes: "We alter the truth on paper so as to alter it in fact; we lie about our past and invent surrogate memories the better to make sense of our lives and live the life we know was truly ours" (*Alibis* 91). The memoir, that is, may be "truer" to the unlived life than to the lived one, and the novel may be more committed to "what really happened" than the "memoir," which is so bound up with the desire to give one's own life "an aesthetic finish." "Longing and recollection, yearning and nostalgia," Aciman writes, "have been confusing their signals so much over the years that I am by now perfectly willing to accept that memory and imagination are twins who live along an artificial border that allows them to lead double lives and smuggle coded messages back and forth" (*Alibis* 189). Aciman gives, after the fact, an account of the ways in which he constructed the scene with which he closes his memoir *Out of Egypt* – the family's last evening in Alexandria. He never took the final walk along the beach on which, as the memoir has it, he thought that he "would always remember this night." But such constructions are better understood, he suggests, as displacements than as lies: "Exile, displacement, and dislocation ultimately induce a corresponding set of intellectual, psychological, and aesthetic displacements and dislocations as well" (*Alibis* 197).

That *Call Me By Your Name* focuses on an erotic relationship between two men has meant that it has not generally been discussed as an autobiographical novel. (Aciman is not identified as a gay writer, and he describes only heterosexual relationships in his essays.) Colm Tóibín's 2007 review of the novel finds it to be, however, "a deeply autobiographical novel," not in its theme but in its shape:

The golden summer, the sheer happiness of Elio as he finds Oliver and his misery when he loses him, can be read as a version, deeply embedded in

metaphor, of Aciman's life in Alexandria and his exile from there Thus it seems that Aciman is not exploring or dramatizing a masked self but finding a new story with which to tell his own story.

TÓIBÍN "Learning to Love"

In an interview with Tóibín, Aciman has said that it was the shared Jewish identity of the two young men that reflected the novel's origins: whereas Oliver "feels very good about being Jewish," Elio's family are, in the words of Elio's mother, "Jews of discretion." Aciman recalls the need to hide Jewish identity in the Egypt in which he grew up, and his envy for a young man he knew who, like Oliver, "never hid his Star of David ... I wanted to know what his secret was, and I wanted to become his friend ... And that was I think the beginning of the obsession that the young character Elio has in the novel" (Aciman and Tóibín 12).

In *Call Me By Your Name*, Elio, as narrator, speaks in Biblical terms of exile and home to describe his feeling towards Oliver – "Was he my home, then, my home-coming? You are my homecoming" (Aciman *Call Me* 49) – and homoerotic desire is, at one point, linked to Jewish rituals which symbolise the uniting of a dispersed people. The models of friendship and erotic love are also drawn from the lost world of Classical Greece, in a Pauline synthesis of Jew-Greek. In the afterword to his collection of essays *Alibis*, Aciman conjures up the image of an amputated limb to describe the ways in which "we are torn in two. Torn from our past, from a home, from ourselves" (Aciman *Alibis* 191), the words echoing Aristophanes' creation myth, in Plato's *Symposium*, in which humans of all three genders (androgynous, male, and female) were, as punishment, split in two – erotic love being the search for our lost half.² "When had they separated us, you and me, Oliver?", Elio asks himself (Aciman *Call Me* 68). Recalling the first time that he and Oliver make love, he remembers that "I had ... the distinct feeling of arriving somewhere very dear ... of finding in each shiver that ran down my arms something totally alien and yet by no means unfamiliar, as if all this had been part of me all of my life and I'd misplaced it and he had helped me find it ..." Elio gives us Oliver's words: "Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine," "which I'd never done in my life before and which, as soon as I said my own name as though it were his, took me to a realm I never shared with anyone in my life before, or since" (*Call Me* 134).

2 As one reviewer of the novel put it: "Aciman, who has written so exquisitely about exile, loss and Proust in his book of essays, *False Papers*, and his memoir *Out of Egypt*, is no less exquisite here in his evocation of Elio's adoration for the lost city of Oliver's body and the lost city of the love between the two men" (D'Erasmio).

Desire in the novel is at once overwhelmingly sensual and carried by language, or languages, down to the very tenses of desire: "my pluperfect lover" (233). The motif of translation – the carrying over from one language to another or others – enters at a number of points in the novel, and finds further form in Elio's musical transcriptions and his fondness for playing one composer in the style of another or others.

In a late scene, Oliver and Elio, spending their last days together on a trip to Rome, attend a publisher's party and a dinner in celebration of a poet whose collection *Se l'amore* is "based on a season in Thailand teaching Dante." The poet embarks on a lengthy anecdote, in which he describes what he terms "the San Clemente Syndrome" (Aciman *Call Me* 192), and the "moral" to be drawn from the palimpsestic structure of the Basilica, with its layered remnants of Christian, Roman and Mithraic culture: "Like the subconscious, like love, like memory, like time itself, like every single one of us, the church is built on the ruins of subsequent restorations, there is no rock bottom, there is no first anything, no last anything, just layers and secret passageways and interlocking chambers" (192). This leads to his account of an evening in Bangkok, spent in the company of an ambiguously gendered "she / he": "I wanted to say, I want you as intermezzo. So I said, I want you as both, or as in between" (196). The anecdote, which has no conclusion, is said to be an illustration of "the San Clemente Syndrome," as if to draw a connection between the indeterminacies of gender and the layerings of historical time.

This episode did not survive into Guadagnino's film, which is in other ways substantially "faithful" to the scenes and dialogues of the novel. (James Ivory goes against much contemporary adaptation theory in his view that film adaptations should be perceived in their relation, and indebtedness, to their source texts, rather than as new and separate entities.) If the film has been found, by many viewers and readers, to be more successful than the novel on which it is based, it is in part because it both alters elements such as the novel's Rome scene, which introduces a cast of new characters (given to wordy anecdotes), and reworks the retrospective framework. In changing the novel's Rome sequence, in which the literary life seems to beckon Elio to a desired future, the film does not dilute the erotic "want" which has absorbed his summer; in the film, the two spend time alone in Bergamo and the surrounding countryside, and Oliver's departure for the United States is rendered as an absolute loss. In the novel, Oliver and Elio meet again fifteen years, and then twenty years on; the film dispenses with these retrospective scenes, but introduces a closing scene, to which I will return, which occurs two years after the events of the summer.

The film of *Call Me By Your Name* is the third in Guadagnino's "Desire Trilogy," following on from *I Am Love* (2009) and *A Bigger Splash* (2015). *I Am*

Love had no source text, though Tilda Swinton, who stars in the film and was one of its co-producers, has stated that it was created around pieces of John Adams's precomposed music,³ while Guadagnino's acknowledged debt in his film-making to Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* [*Journey to Italy*] of 1954 is strikingly present in the film's representations of Milanese architecture and statuary, which become central to the film's affective fabric. *A Bigger Splash* is a close reworking of Jacques Deray's 1968 film *La Piscine*, though in changing the setting from Deray's South of France to the island of Pantelleria, situated between Sicily and Tunisia and a destination point for African migrants, and in making his characters non-Italian nationals, Guadagnino introduces political dimensions seemingly absent from *La Piscine*, despite its 1968 provenance.

In an interview Guadagnino, asked about the Italian response to the film, replied: "They truly, truly, truly hated it ... The cop in *A Bigger Splash* is an in-joke about our own faults" (James 45). The films in the "Desire Trilogy" deal in different ways with Italian nationality and the role of the outsider. In *I am Love*, the cast is Italian, with the exception of Swinton and the US-born but strongly Italian-identified Marisa Berenson, and the dialogue is primarily in Italian. By contrast, the international casting of the central characters in *A Bigger Splash* (Belgian, British, American), and its predominantly English-language dialogue, indicate, as Barry Forshaw suggests, "a specific direction for Italian cinema in the second decade of the twenty-first century" (166): one directed towards an international (and substantially Anglophone) audience.

The film *Call Me By Your Name*, which is located in Lombardy rather than the Italian coast of the novel's location, represents a European cosmopolitanism, linked to the family's status as, in Elio's mother's phrase, "Jews of discretion." Elio's family converse in English, French and Italian, while at one point his mother reads and translates a German fairy-tale; that of the prince who poses the question: "Is it better to speak or to die?" Yet the film is not removed from the context of 1980s Italian history and society. In one sequence, two voluble Italian luncheon-guests at the villa engage in a high-velocity conversation about both cinema (as a "mirror of reality") and Italian politics, during which Elio's parents (Michael Stuhlbarg and Amira Casar) are markedly non-committal. In a later scene the villa's housekeeper Mafalda (Vanda Capriolo) discusses "Bettino" with a fellow kitchen-worker; Benedetto ("Bettino") Craxi, leader of the Italian Socialist Party, became Italy's prime minister in 1983, a position he held until 1987. The setting of the film in 1983 (three years before the novel's time-frame) was determined, Guadagnino has stated, by the sense both that this was

3 See the DVD commentary, Metrodome version.

the year in Italy "when everything that was great about the '70s is definitively shutdown" and that "83 in Italy is probably the last year before the rampant hedonism of the Reagan era poisoned the well of the world ... We thought it would be interesting to see what was probably the last summer to be like that. Maybe it's never going to be like that again" (Galt and Schoonover 75). While the motif of "the last summer" is thus understood by Guadagnino in connection with changes in Italian society, the film represents it predominantly in relation to adolescent desire and the pain of loss. These two dimensions can be conjoined if it is understood that, as Emiliano Morreale suggests, "this suspension, this very long summer, ends up being a metaphor for an era that dreamed itself outside history" (37).⁴

Classical homoeroticism is a central dimension of the film. Showing slides of statues by Praxiteles and others to Oliver, Elio's father refers to "their ageless ambiguity, as if they're daring you to desire them." The opening credits play out over a collaged sequence of images of Greek and Roman statues and Greek vases, closing with photographs of statuary arrayed next to a typed manuscript and a typewriter. (The image of the typescript could signify either or both Oliver's book on the pre-Socratics and James Ivory's script for the film, the latter giving some credence to the view that film exhibits a certain "nostalgia" for its source text.)⁵ In the sequence in *Call Me By Your Name* in which a bronze statue of a young man is brought up from the waters of Lake Garda, its sculpted arm – separated from the torso – becomes a reminder of the "amputated limb" which for Aciman represents the ways in "we are torn in two" and the handshake which Oliver (Armie Hammer) and Elio (Timothée Chalamet) perform with it suggests a reparative conjoining.

Depictions of sexuality in the film *Call Me By Your Name* have divided critics, some following Tóibín's account (in his discussion of the novel) of Aciman's achievement in refusing rigid distinctions between "gay" and "straight" – "The ambiguities that belonged to an older world are being deliberately played with" – while others have been more critical. The US critic D.A. Miller, in his damning review in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, saw it as a dishonest and evasive film – "the Beautiful Life's last and finest flower" – and as a narrative in which "coming of age" masquerades as "coming out." The terms under which homosexuality are admitted in the film, Miller argues, add up to homophobia, and he shares with James Ivory a contempt for Guadagnino's decision to have

4 See Galt and Schoonover n. 8.

5 The image of the script also recalls other adaptations, such as those of Dickens' novels from the mid-twentieth century, in which the pages of a novel are, in the opening sequences, transmuted into the visual images of the film (see Marcus 35–49).

the camera pan from the two men's naked bodies to a view outside the window: "The camera's demure retreat from the sex act," Miller writes, "almost comic in its old-school Hollywood decorum, is all the more striking in a film that gives us so much uninhibited man-on-man kissing."

By contrast, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, taking up Italian film critic Paulo Mereghetti's account of the overt "anachronism" of the panning shot, note that "[r]ather than viewing this movement as a gesture of turning away, closeting, or repression ... we could understand it as a wandering contemplative character." This is characteristic, they argue of Sayonmbhu Mukdeeprom's cinematography, in its enactment of "certain radical instabilities of queer looking" (Galt and Schoonover 69). More generally, Mukdeeprom's mobile framing of landscape "cues its audience to consider a non-diegetic source of narration." This is exemplified in the panning shot which moves away from Oliver and Elio's bodies and through the window, before coming to rest on a stationary shot of a tree in the garden; the immediacy of the scene – its absolute presence – is routed through the interval which will, ultimately, render it as absence and loss. As Dominique Widemann argues of the film's use of off-screen space: "[t]he frames never reveal the complete field of vision. The garden, the salon, the bedroom seem like emotionally overwhelming memories, very precise and incomplete, unbelievably alive" (Galt and Schoonover fn. 22). Frames and framing are central to the film's vision, made literal in the insistent presence of views from and through windows and doorways, from the opening sequence onwards, in which Elio observes Oliver from his bedroom window as he arrives at the villa for the first time; the frame as limit and as perspective creates the relationship between absence and presence, present and past, without the need to make any resort to explicitly retrospective narration.

The final sequences of *Call Me By Your Name* point to the undecidable nature of the losses that have been sustained. Earlier in the film, Elio picks up Oliver's copy of Heraclitus's *Cosmic Fragments*, and the voice-over, in Oliver's voice, gives a gloss on the Greek philosopher's "You cannot step into the same river twice" in which it is understood to mean that "some things stay the same only by changing." Two years after Oliver's departure from Italy (the impact of which is seen in Elio's intense sadness and his father's sympathetic and consolatory speech to him), he telephones the family from America during Hannukah (as snow covers the Italian landscape) to let them know that he is engaged to be married. The film closes with a prolonged sequence, which, in its deeply expressive interiority, could be said to function as a way of translating into the film medium the first-person narrative of Aciman's novel. We watch Elio's face in close-up, as he crouches in front of the fire, while behind him (the depth of field out of focus) the table is laid for dinner. The film's credits roll, while on the

sound-track is "Visions of Gideon," one of the songs, written and performed by Sufjan Stevens in his light, high voice, which function throughout the film as a form of voice-over: "I have loved you for the last time" is the lyric's first line. The prolonged focus on Elio's face, silently "working" through the emotions he is experiencing, could be understood as his following of his father's injunction not to kill pain and sorrow but to accept them as a facet of experience. In the final shot, before the screen goes black, he turns his head as his mother calls his name; the last word in the film is "Elio." The "turning" is at once a suspension of time and a pivot towards a future that has already become the past.

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