

Louis Mazzini's Postcard: the genius loci of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*

To convincingly situate *Kind Hearts and Coronets* in English film history has been a problem, the major symptom of which has been the repeated debates about its purported literariness. Defence of the film, with emphasis on its uniqueness, has led to classifying it as an anomaly, at least in English terms. References to the director, Robert Hamer's Francophile tendencies have frequently been deployed in the process. However, this seems to lead too far away from the fact that the film's aesthetic draws to a considerable extent on an English landscape tradition, namely the picturesque. The relationship between figure and landscape is integral to the plot of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Louis Mazzini's social ascent is appositely articulated through a series of landscapes. As Nikolaus Pevsner points out, the picturesque still had currency in the late 1940s. The town planning which emerged during the post-Second World War reconstruction abstracted the essential form of the picturesque: serpentine, irregular contours which pleasingly confound the explorer. At about the same time, *Kind Hearts* revisited the rural history of the picturesque landscape garden in various forms.

Most simply put, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is before all else a film about an arriviste working his way up through the English class system. Concomitantly and perhaps unavoidably, it is therefore also a film about a landed estate. In the source book for *Kind Hearts*, Roy Horniman's *Israel Rank*, the arriviste protagonist looks forward to owning half a dozen properties with his title. Hamer and his co-script writer John Dighton conflated these into one, singularly iconic house, Chalfont, portrayed by Leeds Castle in the film. The location itself appears in only a few scenes. However, Mazzini's mother's painting of the house appears prominently many times –

significantly it is salient in most of the scenes in which Louis plans his murders. Thus castle is almost omnipresent on the screen.

Apart from the castle's regular appearances, there are also numerous picturesque landscape shots, both of the castle's grounds and of other sites, sometimes actual locations, but mainly studio sets. These landscapes also have their role to play in the murders

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These shots can be seen as part of a strand of insistently iconic uses of the pictorial in Hamer's work – think of the mirror in his *Dead of Night* segment or the caricatural title sequence of *Pink String and Sealing Wax*. Most frequently this pictorial strand manifests itself in lingering landscape shots – the repeated, wearily fetishistic shot of Rose's house in *It Always Rains on Sunday*, the blasted wastelands of *The Long Memory* or the slapstick route to the School for Scoundrels. Indeed, his unconventional tendency to repeat the same shot of a location over and over again, which would probably seem entirely congruous in an avant-garde film, imparts a magical quality to the landscape by virtue of its presence in what is otherwise to all intents and purposes, mainstream British cinema.

This magical quality reaches its apex in the representation of Mazzini's interaction with various landscapes, which arguably displays a more complex intermediality than the 'literariness' of the script. Indeed, if the film bears a relation to the literary, its most dynamic form might be in the film's use of landscape. The stylistic legacy of *Israel Rank* to its adaptation is generally perceived to inhere in Louis's Wildean characteristics – the sophisticated wit of his voice-over or the theatrical dandyism of

his costumes. Perhaps of more consequence, however, is the invention by Hamer, Dighton and the film's art director, William Kellner, of a Wildean device not in *Israel Rank*, namely a magic painting.

The picture Louis's mother paints of Chalfont is pivotal to his murderous trajectory. It hangs on his wall, above the fireplace, wherever he lives, from the drab suburban home of his childhood, to his room in the Hallward's house, to his fashionable bachelor's apartment in St. James's. Ironically, he paces in front of the hearth when deep in thought, as if he is reliving a novelistic cliché of the troubled gentleman – the irony exists because he is really pacing in front of the painting and its hidden reverse, where he charts the systematic killing of every relative before him in the line of inheritance, on the relevant branches of the family tree. Its insistent presence confers on it the role of memorial to Louis's evil. In this sense, it is like Dorian Gray's picture: an accomplice – or, more superstitiously, a familiar.

The painting is also both an index of his objective and a memento of his mother. After her death, her portraits of herself, Louis's father, and her D'Ascoyne ancestors, surrender their combined paradigmatic pre-eminence to this single image and its implications.

### **CLIP**

A shot of his mother's fresh grave cuts to Louis snipping off the part of the family tree featuring the living members and then approaching the picture of Chalfont. As the voice-over delivers the formation in his mind of the murder plot, Louis is patently rearranging the icons of his world: an imminent new dispensation is visually implied,

one cultivated from the relics of his mother's world, the objects upon which his matriarchal education was based. The paradigmatic change is indicated by the subsequent absence of the pictures of Louis's parents from the heart-shaped frame. At the same time, the emphasis is entirely on the horticultural: Louis's 'youthful bravado' is 'one of those acorns from which great oaks are destined to grow'. The acorn, it seems, is planted in the soil covering his mother's coffin. Louis 'prunes' the family tree. He takes this cutting towards the landscape of Chalfont, figuring his arc. It is tacitly hinted thus that there will be the possibility of replanting his mother's grave in the family vault if the oak tree grows. When Louis has later buried the cutting from the family tree on the hidden reverse of the painting, it is also more forcefully suggested that doing so will first mean burying every relative before him in the line of inheritance.

So, what is the significance of this proleptic microcosm, beyond rendering more subtly what is already more or less obvious? Well, firstly it helps us solve something of a conundrum. To what extent is Louis blameable? The question is necessary, because not all of Louis's murders can be dismissed as comedy: as has been pointed out, the final killing we see – that of the Duke – is cold blooded and self-consciously humourless. This is also relevant to the question of motivation in the film, about which Charles Barr and Jeremy Palmer respective views are diametrically opposed. Does the film represent psychological motivation for Louis's crimes or not?

The horticultural references imply a causal branch in Louis's homicidal tree. He asks earlier in the film, after she expresses a near-wish that all of the relatives be wiped out, 'did poor Mama's silly dreaming plant in my brain some seed, which was

afterwards to grow into the most sensational criminal endeavour of the century?’ The pruning scene picks up this question by continuing the metaphor. The point is underwritten by the continual presence of the picture and its obverse in the later shots where Louis considers each murder. That Louis always sees Chalfont through his mother’s eyes is clear from the dissolve from the painting to the cinematographic image of Leeds Castle when Louis first goes to Chalfont. The regressive nature of his murders is emphasised by the childish scrawl with which he crosses through names on the reverse of the painting. The pruning scene provides continuity from her silly dreaming to her painting, which always already represents the killing ground for Louis, the site of his final cold-blooded murder. If Louis is blameable, then so, it seems, is his mother.

However, there is a second inference to be made which contradicts the first: the painting and its obverse serve as a yardstick for us to measure exactly how far Louis deviates in style and morality from his beginnings. If the painting as objective represents and depicts paradigmatic, ‘wish-you-were’ silly dreaming, and the obverse gradually figures an unfolding, syntagmatic murder narrative, which aspires to the objective on the front, then together the two sides encapsulate a postcard aesthetic.

This serves as reminder of the origin of Louis’s trajectory, a reminder of something we see early in the film, when Louis relates the backstory of his mother’s elopement with his father. All three shots of Chalfont we see here are in the postcard tradition – the pictures of Leeds Castle on the Leeds Castle Foundation website are almost identical. What we see is in Louis’s imagination – he is clearly as silly a dreamer as his mother. Louis says his mother left behind the ‘medieval splendours’ of Chalfont –

like all great postcard images, this is a manipulation of the truth: for the most part she leaves behind the splendours of Fiennes Wykeham Martin's Victorian reconstructions, and landscape improvements by an imitator of Capability Brown, and the late 1920's refurbishments and landscaping under the direction of Owen Little, Armand-Albert Rateau and others. These early shots and the accompanying voiceover thus mock the commodified culture of popular landscape imagery to which the picturesque itself gave rise. By the Edwardian era in which the film's narrative takes place, the postcard offered kitsch, mass-reproductions of picturesque country estates. Leeds Castle, itself open only two days a year to the Edwardian public, became a best-selling postcard subject. The film's mockery extends equally to the hackneyed melodramas associated with postcard culture.

We see Louis's father kneeling in a crepuscular landscape shot, proposing in an absurdly mannered gesture to his mother. Louis imitates this posture three times – when he kneels at his mother's bed, when he plays what Sibella calls 'an Italian stage lover' and when he shoots the Duke in the climactic murder. By that last murder, it is visible that much has changed. The landscape is now replete with the picturesque: aesthetically pleasingly views are partly concealed by trees and foliage, which thus teasingly defer full visual satisfaction. As in the most successful picturesque landscapes, these pleasing part-concealments do not look contrived. They are less Capability Brown, more Gilpin. The bathetic melodrama of Mazzini's kneeling father is eventually replaced by the more serious picturesque drama of the third murder. So, in the duration of the film, picturesque narrative is seemingly returned to its historical origins.

Louis effects the final murder at his most calm and assured. He gains power over the duke by a fatal rearrangement of the topography of the landscape. Taking full advantage of the picturesque concealment, he replants one of the duke's hidden man-traps and leads him into it. He subtly reveals to the duke the deliberateness of that replanting by lighting a cigarette – reminding the duke of the excuse he gave to go back and reposition the man trap – that he had lost his cigarette case. His re-enactment of his father's kneeling posture, as he aims to shoot the duke, emphasises just how far Louis has come – no longer simply the silly dreamer of medieval splendours, or the Italian stage lover, he has become a subversion of the improver from picturesque tradition. That is, both as narrator and protagonist, he is responsive to the character of the site, but instead of arranging *pleasingly* confounding concealments, he prepares a *fatally* confounding concealment. Gratification - signalled by the lit cigarette – is deferred by the teasing concealment of the mantrap. Through Louis's plotting, the landscape around Chalfont thus acquires an ironic picturesque.

Unlike Dorian Gray's picture, Louis's mother's painting never changes. With each reappearance, it therefore increasingly accentuates Louis's picturesque divergence from its postcard simplicity. Conversely, its obverse charts the progression of Louis as a killer. That progression is an artistic one: Louis gains an increasing command of the picturesque. Three of his four main murders are committed in picturesque landscapes. During the first – the murder of Young D'Ascoyne and his lover by tipping their boat over a waterfall – Louis participates in the landscape, but is forced to be reactive – to respond to its picturesque vagaries and the homicidal possibilities he chances upon, as he passes through the landscape. He does not plan the method of killing until the last moment, when he discovers the weir.

In the second instance – the murder of Henry D’Ascoyne, the amateur photographer, he plans events around Henry’s concealed alcohol. He puts petrol in Henry’s paraffin lamp in advance, but his contribution to the landscape – the smoke from the explosion – is too absurdly prominent to be picturesque. Only by the third landscape murder does he fully take on the possibilities of the picturesque tradition, by performing in and thus altering a landscape, while himself taking on elements of that landscape. Mazzini emerges as a new, homicidal, arriviste version of the genius loci. He does so by utilising the essentially narratorial aspect of the picturesque, the deferral of revelation. That is, he re-plots a plot of ground.

*Kind Hearts and Coronets* can therefore be used to challenge the pictorialist and narrative division posited by heritage critics such as Andrew Higson, as a defining trait of landscape in British cinema. A significant characteristic of its images plays on the narrative elements of the picturesque. In this way, it provides a strong example of the union of narrative and pictorialist tendencies in a British film based around a landed estate. The turning over of the painting encapsulates this union. At the same time, it quietly symbolises the unveiling of a hidden, violent underside of a seemingly harmless landscape image.

Finally, the film can be deployed to pave the way for revisionist readings of other British films and television programmes, such as *The Go-Between*, *The Ruling Class* and *Brideshead Revisited*, all of which feature outsider characters performing in picturesque landscapes. With similar irony, such works represent their protagonists as new versions of the picturesque genius loci. The enduring idiosyncrasy of *Kind*

*Hearts and Coronets* is too often stressed. In terms of use of landscape, it is, to some extent, the beginning of an audiovisual genre.