



Antje Schumacher

Brian Moore's *Black Robe*

Novel, Screenplay(s) and Film



Studying Brian Moore's *Black Robe* (1985), this book examines the dual adaptation process of historical sources into fiction and fiction into film. The fictionalisation process is analysed on the basis of the *Jesuit Relations* of the 17th century and Moore's novel. Besides transforming and compiling information from these annual reports, Moore also uses them to justify his choice of obscene language for the indigenous characters. The visualisation process is studied with the help of various versions of the screenplay with respect to the differences of narrative and narration in fiction and film. A final exemplary analysis illustrates in detail how the original historical sources were transformed via the novel and the screenplays into the final visualisation in the motion picture.

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*To my mother,
Bianca Schumacher;*

For all the years of support, encouragement and patience

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1. Introduction

The prolific Irish-Canadian novelist and screenwriter Brian Moore¹ only wrote one historical novel in his career, namely *Black Robe*, which was published in 1985.² Moore based his work on the annual reports the Jesuits sent home to their Superiors in France, which were published as the *Relations*.³ Thus, the novel fictionalises actual history. It tells the story of the well-born Jesuit Paul Laforgue, a missionary who comes to New France at the beginning of the seventeenth century. He is sent on a journey from Quebec to Huronia⁴ with his young companion, Daniel Davost, a carpenter who is in love with Annuka, an Algonquin girl. Essentially, *Black Robe* is the tale of Laforgue's and Daniel's adventurous journey into an unknown continent and of the encounter of alien cultures. It is also a chronicle of Laforgue's growing doubts and faith crisis as well as of Daniel's and Annuka's transculturation process thanks to their love for each other. Adventure and love stories are favourites of film and the adaptation process of *Black Robe* to the screen was begun before the novel was even published. Yet, it took six more years to release the feature film *Black Robe*, directed by Bruce Beresford.⁵

Black Robe has thus been adapted twice, as it were. The novel is an adaptation of history and it is worthwhile to study Moore's fictionalisation of the original sources. That will be the task of this thesis's first section. In a second step, I will dedicate my attention to the second adaptation, namely the film *Black Robe*. Rather than examining this on the basis of the text of the novel and the film, i.e. the final product of the adaptation, I would like to examine the whole process of the adaptation by first of all

1 Moore was born an Irishman and became a Canadian citizen in 1953. (cf. Sullivan 2004, 142) He is variably regarded as an Irish or a Canadian writer. (cf. Cronin 24) He is considered a Canadian writer by Woodcock (cf. 211) and New (cf. 1973, 222), for example. Donoghue (cf. 1991, xiii) and Hicks (cf. the title of his 2007 monograph) regard him as Irish. The question of his nationality is discussed incessantly in criticism about his work. (cf., e.g., Blades 45, Gearon x, O'Donoghue 1991, xiii)

A note on referencing in this thesis: This has been done mostly in accordance with MLA standards as set down in the 6th edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, with one exception. When more than one work by an author was consulted, these works are not differentiated by means of abbreviated titles, but by their date of publication. The same holds true for authors with the same surname. If neither is the case, only the author's surname is supplied either in the reference or in the preceding sentence.

2 Cf. Moore 1985. In the references to the novel its title will be abbreviated as *BR*.

3 Cf. the English translation of these multilingual documents by Reuben Thwaites. A computerised version of this is available on the World Wide Web. Refer to the list of Works Cited for the exact bibliographical reference and the full URL.

4 This is the name given to the area in which the first contacts between the Huron and the French took place in the early seventeenth century. It is situated in modern day Ontario. (cf. Story 371f.) Today, it also refers to a tourists' area in Ontario. (cf. Heidenreich n.p.)

5 Please refer to the list of Works Cited at the end of this thesis. The Alliance press release about the film claims: "Director Bruce Beresford read Brian Moore's novel on the same day it was published. 'I was so taken with it that I found out where Moore lives, called him up and told him I wanted to make a film out of it,' says Beresford. 'He told me the film rights had already been sold in Canada so I backed away from it.'" (HRC 12.6)

analysing the screenplay(s) of *Black Robe*. This is interesting and potentially fruitful for several reasons: Firstly, the screenplay(s) were written by Moore himself.⁶ A screenplay and later a film are a visualisation of one reading of the adapted novel, namely the reading of the screenwriter, the director or the producer(s). (cf. Cartmell 2007b, 3) The screenplay(s) of *Black Robe* may therefore – at least partially – be considered as Moore's reading(s) of his own novel and may offer new insights about the novel's meaning or confirm existing interpretations. Secondly, over the period of roughly five years, the screenplay was revised eight times by Moore.⁷ This was necessary because reviewers and producers did not regard earlier versions as accomplished. Fortunately, these reviews and remarks by different readers are available for research along with the typescripts of the screenplays themselves. They are part of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center's collection of Brian Moore Papers.⁸ The different versions of the script as well as the 'Film Notes' – as Moore called them himself⁹ – may offer insights into the creative process of screenwriting and adaptation. Furthermore, neither the notes nor the scripts have been analysed and evaluated. Thirdly, a comparison of the final version of the screenplay with the Beresford's film will illustrate the impact the director had on the screen version of *Black Robe*. In each of these two main sections, it is methodologically necessary to begin with theoretical deliberations as to the fictionalisation of history in novels and the adaptation of novels to the screen respectively, which will provide the bases for the subsequent analyses.

These theoretical preliminaries will be highly indebted to other scholars' work, particularly Ansgar Nünning's work on historical novels, Timothy Corrigan's and Brian McFarlane's monographs on film adaptation as well as Deborah Cartmell's anthology on the latter topic. The same is true for my discussion of Moore's use of the Jesuits' documents. Jeanne Flood's essay on this topic published in 1990 and Patrick Hicks' 2007 monograph as well as Jo O'Donogue's publications need to be mentioned in particular. Kristof Haavik's essay on the film *Black Robe* may be regarded as the most enlightening publication on this picture.¹⁰ Whenever any critic's work is of particular interest, I shall comment on this in the brief introductory and methodological remarks to the respective section.

6 It is not unusual for a successful writer to write screenplays, yet this is often not widely known. Both William Faulkner (cf. Corrigan 1999, 43; Winston 13) and F. Scott Fitzgerald (cf. Winston 13) wrote scripts in Hollywood. Therefore, Moore can be seen not as an exception but as part of a tradition.

7 This is not unusual, according to Corrigan, who claims that screenplays are not only rewritten very often, but sometimes this work is even carried out by different screenwriters. (cf. 1999, 46)

8 Subsequently, the abbreviation HRC will refer to this research facility and its collection. The HRC does not possess Moore's entire archive. Documents related to his work before 1985 are kept at the University of Calgary Library as part of the Special Collections. (cf. Chevrefils 1987)

9 Cf. HRC 10.6. This type of abbreviation will be used throughout the thesis to refer to folders in the collection. The first digit(s) refer to the box, the second to the folder within this particular box. A list of all the folders used in this thesis with short descriptions can be found in the Works Cited.

10 Cf. the list of Works Cited at the end of this thesis for the exact bibliographical references for any of these publications.

A comprehensive study tracing both Moore's fictionalisation of the original Jesuit documents in his novel as well as its adaptation to the audio-visual medium of film has not been published to date. It is the aim of this thesis to fill this gap while making a contribution to the study of the fictionalisation of history in historical novels as well as to the analysis of film adaptations in general.

2. *Black Robe*: The Novel

This section will be divided into three subsections. The first addresses some theoretical preliminaries respecting the genre of Moore's work on the basis of Ansgar Nünning's publication on the theory, the typology and the poetics of the historical novel.¹¹ This forms the basis of my discussion of *Black Robe* as a historical novel and my critical evaluation of existing scholarship on the novel's treatment of history. I will focus on such issues as the similarities and differences between history as an academic discipline and literature as far as methods of selecting and presenting information are concerned.

The overall aim of the second subsection – entitled 'Brian Moore's Fictionalisation of History' – is the classification of *Black Robe* on the basis of Nünning's suggested typology for the historical novel. Historical novels use historical information in varying degrees insofar as authors use their sources selectively. Also, the modes of presentation differ among the types. These two main criteria are the basis of the differentiation of historical novels into types or subgenres.

A short analysis of Moore's 'Author's Note', which precedes the text of the novel and in which he explains his method, seems appropriate here, not least because critics have occasionally read this explanatory preface as “an invitation to check the novel against its sources.” (Flood 1990, 40) An understanding of Moore's deviation from his sources requires, at the outset, a thorough knowledge of them. I plan to draw extensively on existing scholarship on Moore's use of historical sources, namely Flood's and Hicks' work.¹²

11 I refer to the Works Cited at the end of this thesis for the exact bibliographic reference. Even though Nünning analyses the forms and the development of the *English* historical novel since 1950 in the second volume of this work, the theoretical foundation and suggestion of a typology he provides are applicable to the historical novel in the English-speaking world on the whole. In the second volume of his work, he even analyses novels which are usually considered as belonging to what is often called the New English Literatures or Postcolonial Literature in English such as Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* (1975) or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). Furthermore, Nünning acknowledges that even though he concentrates on the English novel, he occasionally draws on examples from Australian, Canadian or Irish writing to highlight parallel developments. (cf. Nünning 18)

12 Cf. Flood 1990; Hicks 2007. Both Flood and Hicks have published prolifically on Moore. Unfortunately, Flood's monograph was written before *Black Robe* was published (cf. 1974); it nonetheless offers, as Sullivan puts it, “excellent reading of some of the novels” (2004, 154); unfortunately, Flood's psychoanalytical approach also leads to some unconvincing conclusions. (cf. Sullivan 2004, 154) The same is true for her 1990 essay on Moore's use of history where she

Since the mode of presentation is of particular interest in the classification of historical novels, I will also comment on Moore's use of literary techniques that clearly identify his text as fiction rather than a work of scholarship. In this context, I will examine the effect of this fictionalisation of history on the reader.¹³ Finally, on the basis of these findings, I shall classify *Black Robe* using Nünning's afore-mentioned typology.

Even though Moore bases his novel on historical sources and *Black Robe* can certainly be regarded as a historical novel, it can also be read as a travel narrative.¹⁴ That is justified because the novel essentially depicts the journey from Quebec to Ihonatiria. I will begin by commenting on features of this novel which are characteristic of adventure tales, which are usually also travel narratives, as well as on the quest motif in *Black Robe*. One notion of great significance in travel literature – both fictional and non-fictional – is that of encounter. The traveller encounters the Other, often undergoes an experience of self-encounter and may subsequently become a changed person as in the case of Laforgue. Aspects like Laforgue's faith crisis may be read in terms of a crisis induced by his encounter with the Other in terms of people and places. Ideas related to the notion of the encounter of Self and Other are those of the clash of cultures and of colonialism, which – as the novel suggests – works both ways. The third key theme in *Black Robe* is the difficulty created when two alien cultures confront each other. In the case of Daniel and Annuka as well as of Laforgue love plays an important role in the process of getting to know, accepting and even partially becoming the Other; this shall be the final aspect of my reading of the novel.

This motif- and theme-based approach to the novel seems to be the most sensible method to provide a basis for the subsequent analyses of the screenplays and the film, which will refer back to the themes and motifs in the novel in a comparative manner. When necessary or appropriate, character analyses will be incorporated into these sections.

2.1. Preliminary Deliberations on History and Historical Novels

Before defining the historical novel, it seems appropriate to reflect upon the nature of historical sources as well as on history as an academic discipline in order to be able to distinguish the genre of the historical novel from appropriately researched history.

reads *Black Robe* as “an assault on the oedipal father.” (52) Her comparison of the novel with its sources nevertheless provides some interesting insights, to which I shall refer in the course of the respective section. Hicks wrote his doctoral dissertation on Moore's use of history as well as nationalism and gender. (cf. 2000b) His essay on *Black Robe* (cf. 2004), which was republished in a slightly altered version as a chapter in his monograph on Moore's re-imagining of the past in his fiction (cf. 2007), as well as the monograph itself have proven very inspiring for my own reading of this novel.

13 Jo O'Donoghue's monograph on Moore's work is an enlightening publication where Moore's techniques are concerned. (cf. 1991)

14 The novel has been read by critics as a chronicle of the faith of Laforgue in the course of his travels. (cf., e.g., Gallagher 1988) In fact, according to Sullivan, faith is a central concern in all of Moore's fiction. (cf. 1996, 2) Approaching the novel as a travel narrative may provide an equally plausible reading of this complex work.

Since this is not a thesis on history but on literature, this theoretical introduction will be as brief as possible.

Sources used for historical research are mainly texts, but may also be pictures or objects from the past. (cf. Opgenoorth 40) Textual sources will be considered subsequently. Because the writer's intention may have an influence on the content of a text, sources are commonly classified accordingly into two groups. (cf. Opgenoorth 42) If the author's conscious intention is to inform his¹⁵ contemporaries or posterity in writing the text, i.e. when the intention was historiographic, then it is vital to examine the writer's background and motivation in order to determine the reliability of his text. Historians must take this into account when dealing with such *traditional* sources. (cf. Opgenoorth 44f.) The second group of sources are those that were created with no deliberate historiographic intention, e.g. diplomas or bills. (cf. Opgenoorth 42) Either of these groups of sources will only ever provide a very limited, abbreviated view of past events.

The academic historian analyses surviving sources with the aim of reconstructing the past on the basis of the information he is able to retrieve from them. Even if the sources are reliable, the scholar can never know *everything* about the matter he is trying to examine; the reconstruction can never be like the actual event was – it will forever remain only approximate. The historian will thus get an idea of what *probably* happened, but not of what happened in reality. The reconstruction may resemble the fact, but it can never become the fact. Therefore, modern historians acknowledge that their works are textual constructions only, which are not objective. (cf. Nünning 52) Hicks sums this up fittingly: “History, it is worth clarifying, is itself a text rather than an objective independent entity.” (Hicks 2007, 7) History, he stresses, is constructed or created, and does not simply exist. This means that the reconstructions of history may and do actually change. The fact that there are academic debates about certain historical issues shows that even studies that comply with all conventions and demands of scholarship may arrive at different, even diametrically opposed results examining the very same sources. This may depend on such factors as the time or society in which the scholar lives and writes or the specific approach the historian decides to choose. This is why history can and must be constantly revised; it is not a stable entity.

The historical novel is a hybrid genre which can be placed in between literature and history¹⁶. (cf. Nünning 42) Literature is usually thought to deal with fiction, whereas academic writing on history is supposed to be based on fact. In historical novels the clear delineations of fact and fiction are blurred. (cf. Nünning 46) For the critic this means that a historical novel dealing with a historical person or period should not be placed under the same scrutiny as a scholarly text on the same subject. Unfortunately,

15 For reasons of style I will use the generic masculine term even when both genders are meant as in this case.

16 Nünning usually speaks of 'historiography' but specifies that he means “Geschichte im Sinne von 'geschichtswissenschaftlicher Darstellung eines vergangenen Geschehens’” (111). Since 'historiography' is a term that may refer to both sources and scholarship in the widest sense, this is slightly confusing. Therefore, I have chosen not to use the term 'historiography' in my thesis; I refer to the same idea as Nünning, though, i.e. the reconstruction of past events according to the conventions of the modern academic discipline called History.