

E. M. Forster – Shaping the Space of Culture Conference Report

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The conference *E. M. Forster – Shaping the Space of Culture* was an online meeting which took place on June 7, 2021. The event was triggered off by the cancellation of the long awaited Forsterian convention that was to take place in Cambridge in April 2020 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Forster's death. Yet, as we all remember, in Spring 2020 we found ourselves locked down in our homes, trying to accommodate to, what we then thought, a temporary inconvenience. By the end of 2020 it was becoming clear that the Covid-19 pandemic was to stay with us much longer. Therefore, in order to make up for the loss at least slightly and to address the desire expressed by several members of IEMFS to meet and share the ideas despite the circumstances and against the odds, the International E. M. Forster Society decided to hold a virtual conference devoted to the life and work of Forster. The academic online meeting took place in June 2021 to commemorate the 51st anniversary of Forster's death and to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the establishment of our Society.

The aim of the conference was to evaluate the presence of Forster and his oeuvre in the world of culture. The word 'space', a commodious term, in the title of our conference was to reflect, in the first place, a vast array of angles from which Forster and his works, both literary and non-literary ones, can be approached. But above all, the notion of the space of culture was to underline the multicultural and multidimensional character of his works and ideas. In his novels, shorts stories, lectures, or radio broadcasts, the writer created the space which is a meeting point of various fields of human activities, a construct allowing for interdisciplinary collaboration. His narratives feature many voices, many geographies, and many cultures. Space, thus, can stand for numerous notions and can accommodate for scholarly discussions enclosing different subjects and areas of knowledge. As for the other word from the title, equally important, 'shaping', it also has a double-layered meaning. On the one hand, it refers to Forster's creativity, his way of shaping fictional worlds and, in turn, the way his writing became a part of Modernist culture. On the other hand, 'shaping'

expresses the importance of Forsterian element in the present-day culture, its ceaseless influence on the thinking and writing of others. Subsequently, the conference addressed the rich and complex worlds created by Forster a century ago and demonstrated how his works, and the values he stood for within British and world culture(s), got recontextualized in the 21st century.

The event, despite technical challenges, was a great success and it was quite exceptional for a couple of reasons. It was the first online conference organized by the International E. M. Forster Society. It was also the fourth conference under the auspices of the Society devoted entirely to Forster. And, perhaps most importantly, the conference, thanks to the mighty Machine, succeeded in bringing together Forsterian scholars from all over the world, thus confirming the continuity of the presence and legacy of Forster and his works.

The papers and presentations prepared for the conference and available online ahead of time were followed by the compelling and engaging discussions which reflected the rich nature of the oeuvre of Forster and the responses in literature, arts, social history his writings continuously generate half a century after his demise. Additionally, the symposium indicated the variety of perspectives that can be applied while researching the works and life of Forster. Subsequently, many aspects of Forster's oeuvre and life, as perceived by various theories, methodologies, and schools, were presented. The researchers focused on re-reading Forsterian texts by looking at them from the 21st century perspective, on contemporary receptions of the writer as well as on the extent to which and the way in which different cultures influence the shaping of our perception of Forster nowadays.

The meeting, opened by the head of the Society, Prof. Krzysztof Fordoński, was divided into two parts. Part 1 was inaugurated by Prof. David Scourfield of Maynooth University in the Republic of Ireland, who delivered a very illuminating plenary lecture on Forster's Rome. In his presentation Scourfield brought attention to the fact that although Italy features in Forster's fiction frequently, Rome merely makes some background appearance. Yet, as he argued, these fragments of Rome and its culture are also important within the context of Forster's work and life. Afterwards, he discussed Forster's relation with Rome through classical antiquity, the aspect which comes to the fore in his writings. He also underlined the fact that this Roman facet of Forster's work is neglected since it is Greece and its culture that features more often there. He also added that in scholarly consideration, the figure of Forster is usually viewed via Victorian Hellenism. Scourfield, thus, focused on analysing the scattered traces of Roman

culture represented in Forster's works with Latin literature, especially Vergil, various references, visual arts allusions, quotations or comments. In conclusion, the scholar stated that Rome, in its many disguises, is still a bridge between the past and the present; it keeps on influencing our world just as it once did when it comes to Forster, his life and oeuvre.

This part of the conference was sub-divided into three sections. Section 1 entitled "Place and Space" was opened by John Attridge's talk on "Great Worlds, Little Societies and Echo Chambers – Revaluating Cambridge and Cultural Capital in *The Longest Journey*". Attridge focused on the imperfections, indicated by Forster in the novel, of Cambridge University environment, a seemingly ideal space for cross-cultural understanding. He argued that Forster, rather than blindly praising Cambridge academic life, was conscious of its various drawbacks. Moreover, Attridge viewed Forster's doubts expressed, among others, in *The Longest Journey*, as a form of foreshadowing of the 21st-century universities, which are frequently referred to as 'echo-chambers' that ill-equip students for their later lives beyond the campus.

The discussion on the importance of space and place was continued by Irina Stanova. In her paper, "Creation of Transcultural Space in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Its Film Adaptation", she compared the source text and the film. Her analysis was based on the concept of transcultural space, which, on the one hand, is perceived as a concrete physical and geographical space, but on the other, is also viewed as a narrated space and a more abstract one characterized by eventual symbolic elements. The comparative analysis allowed Stanova to evaluate the changes in representation of transcultural space enforced by the process of adaptation. Following the space-place oriented discussion, Diana Hirst considered "'Place-Feeling' in the Fiction of E. M. Forster and Elizabeth Bowen". First, she examined the way Forster generated 'place-feeling'¹ in the short story 'The Curate's Friend' and the novels *The Longest Journey* and *Howards End*. Next, Hirst looked at Bowen's three war-time short stories in order to consider the construction of 'place-feeling' in them. The selection of texts was based on the assumption that Forster's texts refer to those of Bowen's. The

1 The term was used by Elizabeth Bowen when she wrote about Forster's influence on her writing. In her contribution to *Aspects of E. M. Forster* edited by Oliver Stallybrass, she notes that "the central, most powerful magnetism of the Celestial Omnibus stories was in their 'place-feeling'" (Stallybrass 1969: 5), and Forster himself uses a similar expression commenting on the fiction of others, noting that "[m]any novelists have the feeling for place – Five Towns, Auld Reekie and so on" (Forster 1978: 51).

section was closed with Emma Sutton's presentation of *Twenty-First-Century Readings of E. M. Forster's 'Maurice'* (2020). The book edited by her and Tsung-Han Tsai is the first book-length study of this posthumously-published novel. The publication is composed of nine essays which look at *Maurice* in the context of literature, film and new media and changes in the perception of the novel as well as its afterlives during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Section 2, entitled "Queer", explored the issue of homosexuality within the framework of literary texts, history, and Forster's life. Claire Braunstein Barnes opened the panel presenting the paper "'Áh yòù sílly àss, góds live in woóds!' – Queer appropriations of Edwardian Classicism in Forster's short stories and *Maurice*". In her essay, she examined the interplay between Classical tropes and queer identities. In her considerations, Barnes focused on the way Forster approached and interpreted the scholarly Classicism. She concluded that his understanding of queer classicism is characterized by a more universalised quality, which, in turn, points to the divergence from the Wildean and Philhellenic background typical of his upbringing and of the previous century. Further on, Rohit Chakraborty discussed "Queers of Brit-India: Assimilation, Excision, and (Dis)Orienting Homosexuality in E. M. Forster's *Maurice* and Neel Mukherjee's *Past Continuous*". He concentrated on the (a)symmetry between the two texts when it comes to negotiating homosexuality with nationalism. Chakraborty also demonstrated how the two texts are interconnected and how they simultaneously Orient and disOrient homosexual desire.

Athanasios Dimakis explored the transgressive potential of the hotel in the short story "Arthur Snatchfold" (written in 1928 and published posthumously in 1972). He argued that the space of the hotel comes to resemble a Foucauldian counter-site and is central in the analysis as the hotel is a heterotopic place; it is a heterotopia of crisis and deviation but also a place of infinite possibility. Closing the section, Dominika Kotuła elaborated on "Spaces of desire in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, 'The Other Boat' and 'Dr Woolacott'". She pointed out that the protagonists of the narratives in question exist simultaneously in the official, codified social spaces and in 'the secret places'. Interestingly, the disruptive, forbidden type of desire can exist only in the 'othered' spaces. Such areas often determine the characters' identities and fates, profoundly influence their perception yet, at the same time, they rarely seem to be of permanent or definite quality.

The next part, that is Section 3, was named Echoes. It was opened with Krzysztof Fordoński's "A Very Different Room with a Completely Different

View: Kevin Kwan's *Sex and Vanity* as an 'Update' of E. M. Forster". Fordoński demonstrated how an adaptation, trying to reinvent Forster's characters and plot twists, can easily kill Forster's novel if the author does not pay enough attention to such crucial elements of the narrative as the time of its action, the location, and, most importantly, the social origins of the main characters. The result is, as Fordoński concluded, that *Sex and Vanity* reads like a glossy magazine in which the focus is on detailed descriptions of expensive clothing and extravagant interiors.

Pursuing Forsterian reverberations, N. Cyril Fischer asked himself the question: "To whom does Forster beautifully belong?"² According to scholars, the work of Forster can be classified within a couple of cannons, such as modernist literature or queer studies. His life and work are also recognized by a few celebrated contemporary writers, Zadie Smith or Alan Hollinghurst, among others. But Fischer claimed that something crucially Forsterian is missing from this contemporary picture of the writer. Namely, Forster's reception in other, far less mainstream circles, is not being given the proper attention. He argues that such sources give us the opportunity to enquire into those aspects of Forster's legacy that have been apparently lost, frequently due to the agitation caused by well-established authors and well-funded film adaptations.

Cecilia Björkén-Nyberg discussed "Vocal Mapping: The Representation of E. M. Forster's Spatial Imagination in Audiobook Narration" drawing on the connotation 'echo' has with sound. She contended that in Forster's narratives specific descriptions are often counterbalanced by spatial imagery that has some affinity with music and that, in turn, suggests a certain sense of budding freedom. Additionally, Forster's spatial imagery seems to belong to a liminal zone, that is something between place and space. Following, Björkén-Nyberg addressed the question of spatiality as represented in the vocalisation of Forster's Edwardian novels. She pondered on the way the audiobook voice, the temporal medium, is able to create a heteroglossia of narratorial, focalised, and mimetic voices. More specifically, she focused on audionarratological and prosodic features, and showed how they bring out new dimensions in Forster's spatial imagination. The last presentation in the section, Sandhya Shetty's "'The Planet Must Have Looked Thus': Telluric Forster" looked at Forster's work from yet another angle. As Shetty noted, *A Passage to India* is a novel that thinks geologically.

2 The title alludes to the question ("To whom do you beautifully belong?") Nick Guest, the protagonist of Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2005), asks himself and others repeatedly.

Therefore, discussing *A Passage to India*, she enters into a dialogue with geology. In other words, tracing the telluric Forster, Shetty attempted to reconceptualize the novel as literary stratigraphy. According to her, the dynamic history of the Earth's crust is brought to imaginative life in the novel's descriptive invocations of ancient continental drifts and geological processes.

Part 2 of the conference was opened by Professor Claire Monk from De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, who delivered a highly enlightening lecture entitled "Forster and Adaptation: Across Time, Media and Methodologies". In her presentation, Monk proposed further directions of the development of Forster and Forsterian adaptations studies. Consequently, she posed a question of how we can best conceptualize studying the field of adaptation and mediation responses to Forster's works at the present moment. She argued that when looking for answers, one should take into consideration, on the one hand, commerce and institutions involved in the process of adaptation and, on the other, culture networks and relations, paying particular attention to the rapid development of technology and digital culture. Thus, Monk applied a cross disciplinary perspective to examine current state of Forster adaptation scholarship. Next, she suggested a chronological organization of the Forster adaptation studies based on, among others, Forster's lifetime, interest in this work or media used. Subsequently, she arranged Forster adaptations within three phases, namely, phase one (1942-1973) – the adaptations realized during Forster's lifetime and of which Forster was aware; phase two (1984-1992) – Forster feature films cycle appears; and phase three – generally any adaptation after 1992, across various media. Then all the phases were discussed in detail, including comments on various methodologies that were or could be used in Forster adaptation criticism.

After the lecture, the meeting continued with Section 4, which was devoted to travel. First, Francesca Pierini presented her paper entitled "From E. M. Forster to Harlequin Short Contemporaries: The Making of Italy in Anglophone Literary and Popular Fiction". Pierini's claim was that highly diverse texts (for example, the works by Forster, Daphne du Maurier, Ian McEwan, Sarah Hall, on the one hand, and commercial brands of popular fiction, like historical romance novels, Harlequin short contemporaries, Harlequin manga, on the other) aimed at different audiences, could constitute interesting venues of inquiry into the processes of identity formation and cultural representation. Consequently, she highlighted the manners by which cultures are taxonomically perceived and organized within a global context. Then, Jason Finch talked about "Forster and

Public Transport: The Case of ‘West Hackhurst’”. He recontextualized Forster within the current ‘mobilities turn’ in the humanities, the turn which centers on pursuing the questions and feelings related to movement. Finch deliberated on the field of public transport in Forster’s life and works, an area which so far has been neglected. He examined in detail the question of the influence of public transport mobilities on the narrative of Forster’s 1940s–50s memoir ‘West Hackhurst: A Surrey Ramble’. The framework of mobility studies was also employed by Hager Ben Driss. She debated over “Mobility Justice in E. M. Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread*”. Driss reasoned that mobility is at the heart of the plot of Forster’s debut novel and it functions as a narratological strategy of characterization. By focusing on movement and stasis, either voluntary or coerced, one can note the emergence of certain patterns related to (im)mobility and how the movement or its lack shapes cultural and gendered spaces.

The following panel, Section 5, was dedicated to Culture. It was started off with Ria Banerjee’s consideration of “Clothing and Culture in E. M. Forster’s Wartime Writings”. She referred to the times when Forster lived in the British protectorate of Egypt, 1917-1919. According to her, this was the period when Forster’s anti-war sentiments were expressed especially vividly through clothing (for instance, his refusal to wear the Red Cross uniform after hours). Banerjee further argued that clothes could be viewed as a cultural site for Forster in Egypt. To prove her point, she gave examples from Forster’s wartime notes which touched upon wardrobe, and reflected on the writer’s subsequent usage of men’s clothing in such a way that the clothes became devices for creating space in which a range of overlapping human activities was reflected.

Afrinul Haque Khan in her paper “Shaping the Culture of Tolerance: A Study of Forster’s Humanism in *Howard’s End* and *A Passage to India*”, examined Forster’s idea of tolerance, stating at the same time that this concept is central to the writer’s perception of humanism. As Khan contended, for Forster tolerance was a type of force which made the connections between different races, classes, and nations possible. On the basis of the two novels, Khan demonstrated how Forster’s literary texts express and construct the culture of tolerance. Furthermore, she pointed out the features that characterize Forster’s approach to tolerance. The question of culture within the context of *A Passage to India* was of interest also to Ellie Gardiner who elaborated on “Bridging the Gulf: The Complex Relationship of East and West in Forster’s *A Passage to India*”. She paid particular attention to the division into the Chandrapore

East and the Anglo-Indian West part of the city in the novel. Gardiner demonstrated how Forster presented this split through friendships, misunderstandings, and spirituality. Additionally, she examined the tripartite structure and multicultural space of the novel, the elements which further emphasize the impossibility of a full connection of East and West. The section was closed with the paper "Shaping a Queer Museum: Forster, Ancient Egypt and the British Museum" delivered by Professor Richard Bruce Parkinson. The Author argued that Forster's connections with Egypt were formed through the Hellenistic past and modern village life rather than through the shallow, popular, and/or academic Egyptology. Parkinson discussed the development of Forster's attitude toward national museums in reference to *Maurice* (as revised in 1932) and earlier works which include references to classical collections.

The final part of the conference, Section 6, comprised of two papers dedicated to the theme of Communication and Technology. Anna Kwiatkowska, in "The Voice of the Machine in E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'" focused on disclosing the scattered traces of the Machine 'psyche' in order to differentiate the voice of the Machine and its way of reading the reality from the one belonging to the human story-teller. She clarified that within the multiple voices of the narrative (human narrator, characters), there is also the voice of the Machine. While the human voices expressing their respective views on the presented world can be fairly easily matched with their owners, the voice of the Machine is characterized by a large degree of anonymity. Nevertheless, it can be identified by examining two, interlinked, planes, namely linguistic and perspectival. Additionally, Kwiatkowska stated that in order to discern the automatic mind, the assessment of the degree of emotional saturation of utterances as well as an attitude towards human beings suggested in them should be considered. The second paper, by Elif Derya Şenduran, "Speaking through the Wearisome Machine: E. M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'" also considered the only science-related story created by Forster. Şenduran decided to explore the notion of space and view the air-ship and the machine as a metonymic extension of capitalist modernity and Anthropocene. Subsequently, she pondered upon the concepts of universal commodification and cultural hegemonization, and commented on the lock-down enforced by the Machine, resulting in immobility of the lives of Vashti and her son Kuno. As Şenduran stated, the machine's cognitive mapping for Vashti, that is incompatible with Kuno, delineates the maladaptation of machine life to cultural practices of survival in the story.

At the close of the conference, the event was discussed and concluded. The meeting confirmed that E. M. Forster is still very much present in the world of culture. Moreover, the multi-layered and rich response from the participants clearly showed that the interest in Forster, his texts, both literary and non-literary ones, as well as their influence on the space of culture (popular culture included) and literature is steadily growing. The scholarly papers, presentations and discussions that followed apparently demonstrated that the issues the writer tackled are continuously stirring emotions among both the researchers and fans of Forster.

References

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