

EXPORTING ENGLISH EVANESCENCE VIA THE SILVER SCREEN: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

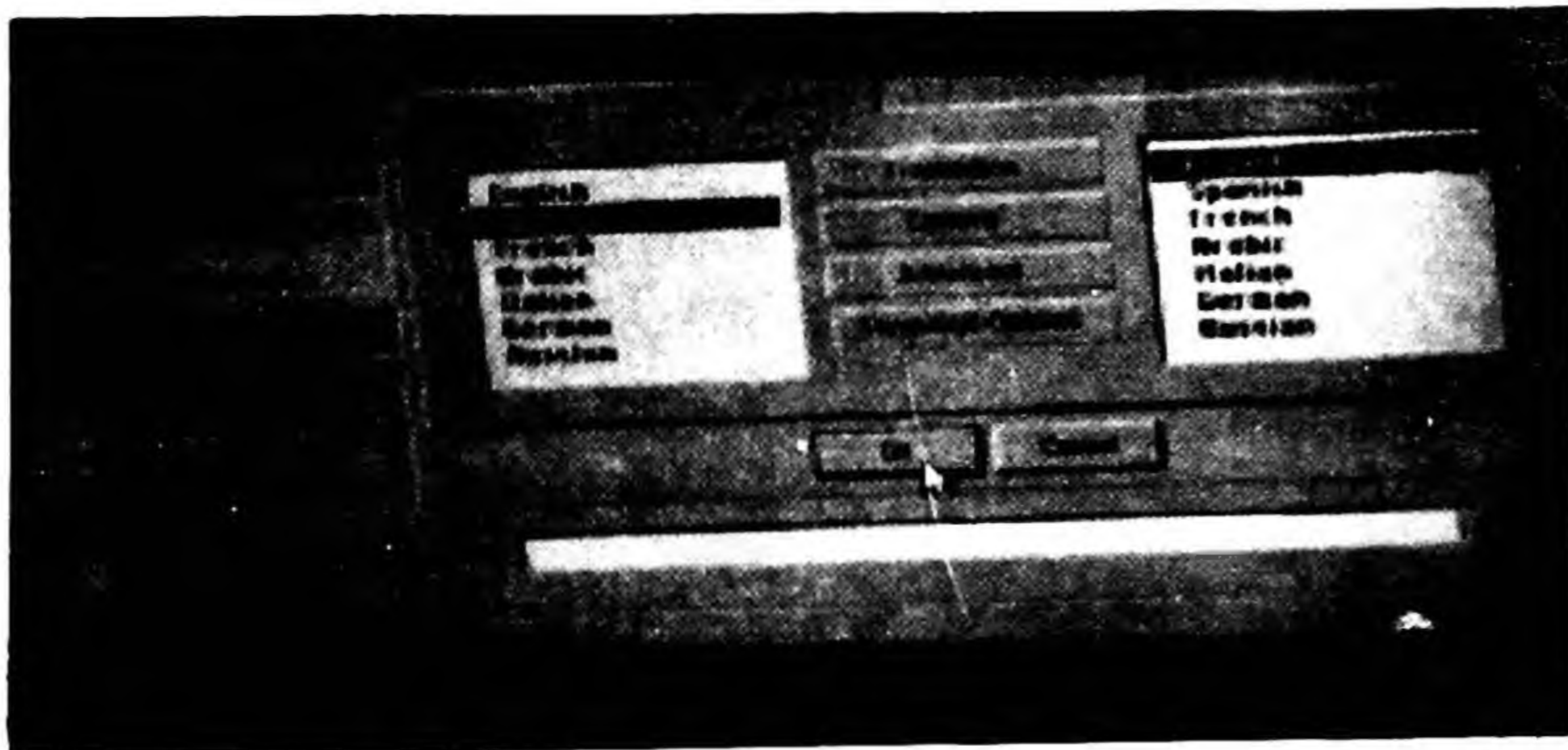
At the turn of the 21st century concerned with the shrinking linguistic diversity on the planet, UNESCO commissioned a study whose findings reported the rise of mega-languages such as English, Spanish and French often to the detriment of lesser known languages the world over (Skutnabb-Kangas, Maffi and Harmon, 2003). The findings of this study corroborated other research conclusions pertaining to global linguistic preferences at the turn of the millennium. Payack (2008) for instance reports:

In the early 2000s, the member nations of the UN were asked which language should be the dominant one in official communications between and among embassies. More than 120 chose English. Some 40 selected French, and 20 selected Spanish. (8)

According to some estimates, of the 6,912 languages currently in use globally (O Grady, et.al, 2010: 2), a mere 12 of these languages form the linguistic repertoire of “50% of the global population” (Graddol, 2007: 60). Furthermore, some estimates put 60% of the world’s languages at risk of linguistic moribundity by the end of this century (O’Grady et.al 2010). So, while “globally, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception” (Joseph and Ramani, 2006: 186) in that more than half the world is currently multilingual to some degree (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2003), with at least 70% of the world purported to possess varying levels of bilinguality, (Richards and Rogers, 2001) very few scholars have examined how a mere handful of languages have acquired and continue to maintain such a

privileged global mega-language status. How for instance has English acquired such a preferred global status—a language boasting the largest number of learners on the planet (O'Grady et. al, 2010). Is this an accidental turn of affairs? To quote Canagarajah (2006), "We can't think of language as having a life of its own, spreading globally by its own sweet will" (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006:203). So, while some scholars such as Payack (2008) seem content on concluding: "Sure, cultural hegemony fuels global English" (10) going so far as to posit "But it's cultural hegemony driven by the people, and driven from the ground up," they fail to highlight the specific factors impelling such linguistic cravings. What researches such as Payack (2008) fail to explain is why people the world over want English. Stated differently, how is desire for English on a planetary level both construed and constructed on the part of cultural enterprises—educational and entertainment-based?

Recent research has examined the growing hegemony of inner circle English varieties in the era of globalization (Graddol, 2007; Maurais and Morris, 2003). While the role of literature and education in creating and sustaining such hegemony has been widely discussed (Crystal, 2008; Philipson, 1992), few researchers have examined the role of other more recent, innovative and powerful media in the global export of English (Pennycook, 2007), in particular, the role of Hollywood films in the overseas sale of a planet-wide desire for English. For scholars to ignore outright the overt ways in which English desire is constructed in and through the cultural machinery of film is to ignore a key causal variable in the global spread of English. Until the etymological reasons for such global spread are carefully examined, discussions about the status of global linguistic diversity will be in vain. Consider for instance, this seemingly innocuous image of a 'translation scene' taken from the action thriller *Miami Vice* which carefully places English at the top of the list.



After all, former foreign secretary, Lord Kinnock in his preface to Graddol (2007) makes a case to the British public for the economic benefits currently accruing to inner-circle English-speaking (Kachru et. al., 2006) nations such as Britain when he concludes: "The English language teaching sector directly earns nearly £1.3 billion for the UK in invisible exports and our other education related exports earn up to £10 billion a year more" (Graddol, 2007: 4). Perhaps this is what Canagarajah (2006) means when he says linguistic "power is real" (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006:202). The diminished importance of "the canonical context of native English speaking" (Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006: 3) makes the market of English outside of inner-circle countries (Kachru et.al. 2006). While Canagarajah (2006) rightly asserts: "So, who owns the English language?" adding: "English is not the language of the UK or USA any more" (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006: 202), it is important to reiterate that the profits from 'Englishing' in two arenas: publishing and popular culture consistently stream towards inner-circle communities. This confirms Canagarajah's (2006) observation that "English still serves as linguistic capital" (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006:203) for the inner circle, and further lending credence to Tsuda's (2000) astute observation:

Because English sells well, English is now one of the most important products of the English-speaking countries. So, English is not merely a medium, but a proprietary commodity to be marketed across the world. (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006: 24)

Film has to be viewed as a powerful purveyor of such transcultural and linguistic flows. The current paper provides evidence from recent blockbuster and award-winning motion pictures to demonstrate how visual and verbal English is carefully conflated on Hollywood's 21st century creations—a linguistic showcasing seemingly synchronized with global multilingualness but in fact, a filmic manipulation functioning to privilege English in the face of competing global

linguistic rivals such as French and Spanish. A look at the changing linguistic map in a 'unified' post-EU Europe sheds light on the linguistic dissonance as well as concomitant linguistic advantage that global English is generating in Europe:

A lively debate has been taking place in Europe over the cost of learning English. In November 2005, the French government published a report by François Grin which argued that as English had become the *de facto* lingua franca of Europe, the burden fell on European governments to teach their citizens English. Comparing the difference in expenditure in foreign languages education in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, Grin concluded that the dominance of English represented a net annual payment to the UK of over 10 billion Euros. (Graddol, 2007: 120)

Consequently, as Canagarajah's (2006) claims: "pointing out the more abstract social factors in the dominance of a language should not be used to obfuscate the sources of power (i.e., the people who directly and indirectly benefit from the hegemony of that language)" (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006:202). One need only look at the following chart with figures taken from Eurobarometer's most recent report to understand the exponential linguistic growth of English in Europe. The chart below notes an overall increase of 43% in English speaking in a mere 5 countries within a six-year span with every country within the past decade—including countries such as France who have been extremely resistant of English-based imagery incursions in arenas such as advertising (Martin, 2006)—boasting an increase in speakers of English.

1999 study by the European Commission 2006 study by the European Commission

(Source: Stanley, 2000: 4).

(Source: Europeans and their Language).

78% of Dutch speak English

87% of Dutch speak English

77% Swedes speak English

89% of Swedes speak English

41% Germans speak English

56% Germans speak English

30% French speak English

36% in France speak English

28% Italians speak English

29% Italians speak English

These figures confirm even further MacArthur's (2006) conclusion that "English is big business, with franchises and products galore" (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni,

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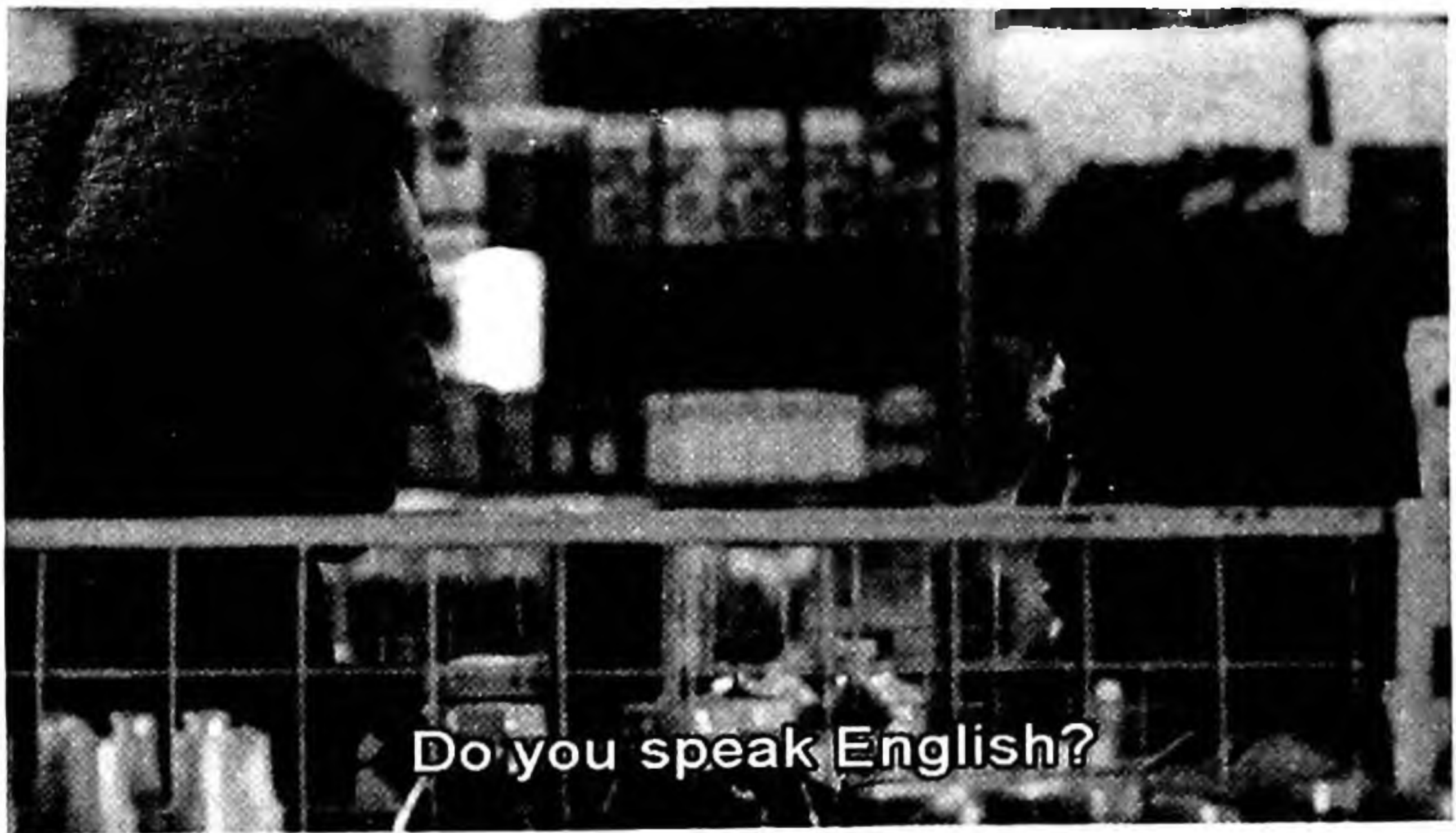
2006: 24). After all, Sweden has taken over Holland in the highest number of English speakers in Europe. The French were right to be worried. Visual strategies are powerful in engendering linguistic desire evident from research findings on the effects of image-based English in the advertising industry in France (Martin, 2006). Film is another powerful exemplar of a visually-rich medium with a potential to shape mimetic desire. After all, nothing in filmmaking is accidental.

The current paper argues that instantiations of visual English in films from Hollywood, far from being accidental, peripheral, filmic wallpaper, in fact function as pivotal cinematic content meant to both instigate and sustain a universal desire for English. Visual English it is argued is both a visible and invisible actor on current Hollywood's screens. While the strategies of exporting global English evanescence from a cinematic point of view are multifarious, the focus of the current paper is on two forms of visual English consistently spotlighted in film after film. Particularly in recent Hollywood releases, one cannot fail to 'notice' the screen clutterings of visual English consistently rendered in two conflated formats: Dynamic or moving visual English, and still or static English—two complementary and potent semiotic devices occurring with alarming frequency. The final verdict: visual English functions as cinematic strategy— 'an aural and visual spectacle' (Garwood, 2006: 174) within the 'diegetic space of film' (Garwood, 2006: 179) serving to both impel as well as sustain a mimetic desire for English both locally, and globally.

Via a plethora of blended filmic and linguistic strategies which spotlight static and dynamic English—including but not limited to: close up camera pans of foregrounded and backgrounded visual English in screen shots; filmic manipulations of prominence—posing popular global icons next to, in front of, behind, or on top of visual English—; screen-space interruptions of visually unfolding English, on-screen overwriting of English in real time, and screen space dialogic detailing of the linguistic features of English within unfolding plot details— visual English on the silver screen it is argued, functions to both create and sustain a preference for English in a multilingual world—a habitus (Bourdieu, 1984)— for English fluency in a multilingual world on a fast track towards monolinguality. What the paper demonstrates is the manner in which 'innocuous' sightings of screen-time English impel a mimetic desire for English access on the part of non-speakers of English across the world in general, but more specifically, in populous countries like India where language sales suffice to create desire for other market commodities.

DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH? : ON-SCREEN INTERROGATIONS

A global prompt for English fluency forms a predictable dialog ingredient in recent films. The seemingly innocuous interrogative: "Do you speak English?" has been recorded in scores of recent films such as: *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; *Sweetland*; *Night at the Museum*; *Crash*; *Home of the Brave* –to name a few from a litany of collected examples. A visual rendition is presented below from *Bangkok Dangerous*.



The conflation of global icons such as Nicholas Cage (seen in the still above) asking this interrogative often prompts an on-screen evaluation [and, it may be argued, an off-screen self –evaluation] of English-speaking skills. In the Oscar-winner, *Once*, the protagonist prods her immigrant mother with: "Try to speak a little English, Mama." This is often matched with the speech act of apology for halting English fluency on the part of non-native speakers of the language. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* for example, the following dialog occurs between a police officer, and Mr. Ripley.

Officer: Sorry, My English perhaps is coarse.

Ripley: Yes. It is a little coarse. Yes.

Officer: I will be a little more careful with my English.

Countless filmic episodes of apologizing for 'poor' English skills occur on screen. In some cases characters face overt linguistic humiliation for halting English-speaking skills as visualized in the stills below taken from the award winning film,

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Crash, where a bigoted character sees it fit to insult a new immigrant's emerging English skills.



This writer is yet to code a single speech act of linguistic apology for the lack of fluency in languages other than English. Consider for instance, the marked absence of any claim by Angelina Jolie in *A Mighty Heart* of: "Sorry my Urdu is bad". Instead, her badly rendered phonetic imitation of Urdu gets the admiring compliment of: "You speak Urdu?" on the part of a starstruck native-speaker of Urdu who in disbelief utters the following admiring comment—reproduced below:



In contrast, apologies for halting English-skills abound with predictable frequency. In the high-budget, blockbuster *Man on Fire*, a Mexican police officer is said to declare; "My Russian is better than my English" with other such apologetic confessionals cluttering the soundtrack of several films, a few examples of which are provided below:

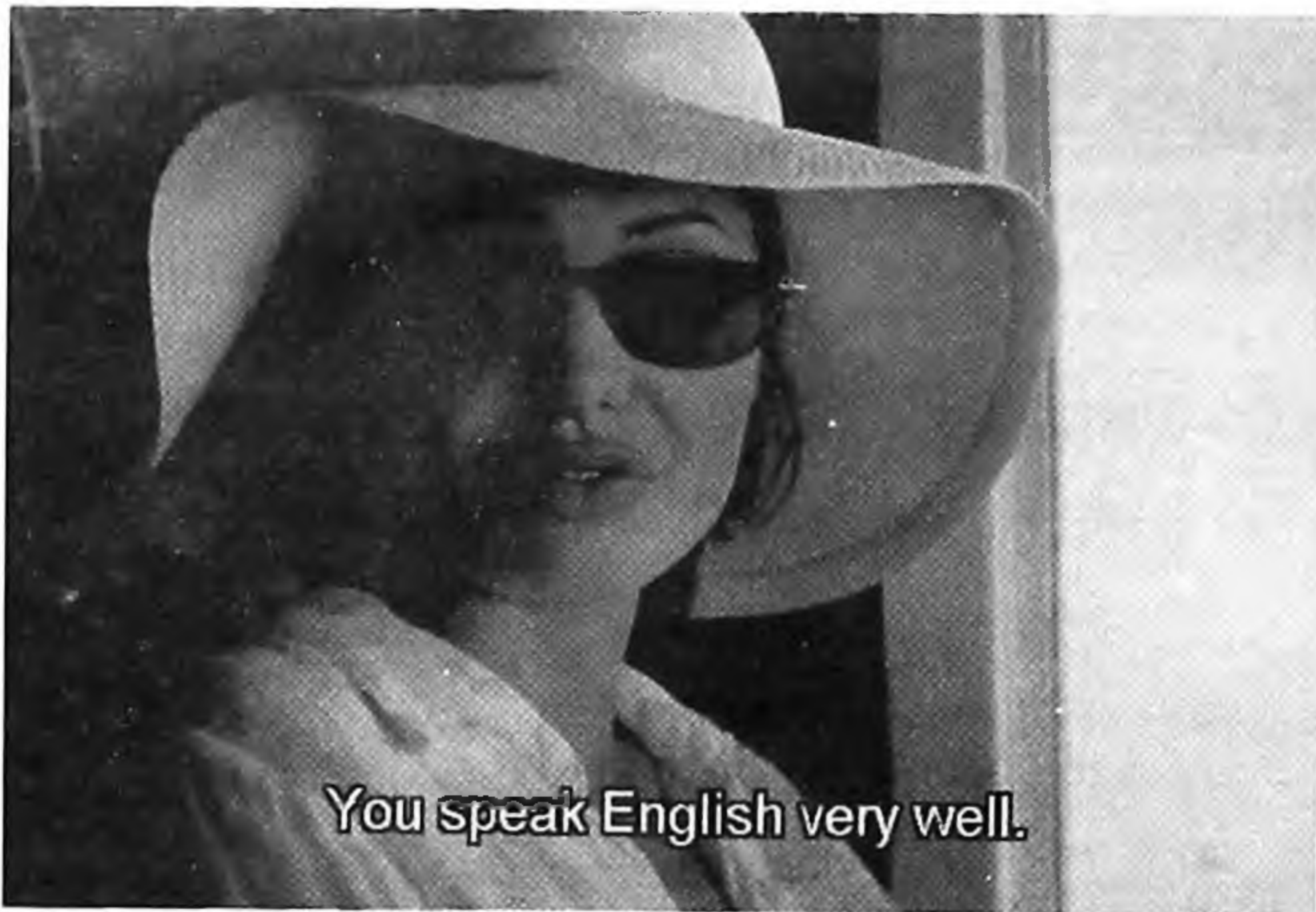
‘His English, like mine, is not that good’ (American East)

“He doesn’t speak English does he?” (The Painted Veil)

“My English isn’t that good” (The Band’s Visit)

“So, Sorry I don’t speak English” (Balls of Fury)

With such on-screen pressure for English fluency, it is no accident that global icons are shown to overtly comment on prowess in English skills as seen in the still below, taken from *Beyond Borders*—where fluency in English—not even a remote thematic concern of the filmic script is emphasized. Such on-screen linguistic complimenting is often followed by remarks about the seeming facility with which English can indeed be learned [the subject of another paper].



Selling People; Selling Language

Global icons are often filmed in front of, next to, near, or behind visual English. Consider for example, the following screen shots taken from the Oscar-winner, *Atonement* where Keira Knightly is carefully conflated against a backdrop of visual English in the two sample shots below:

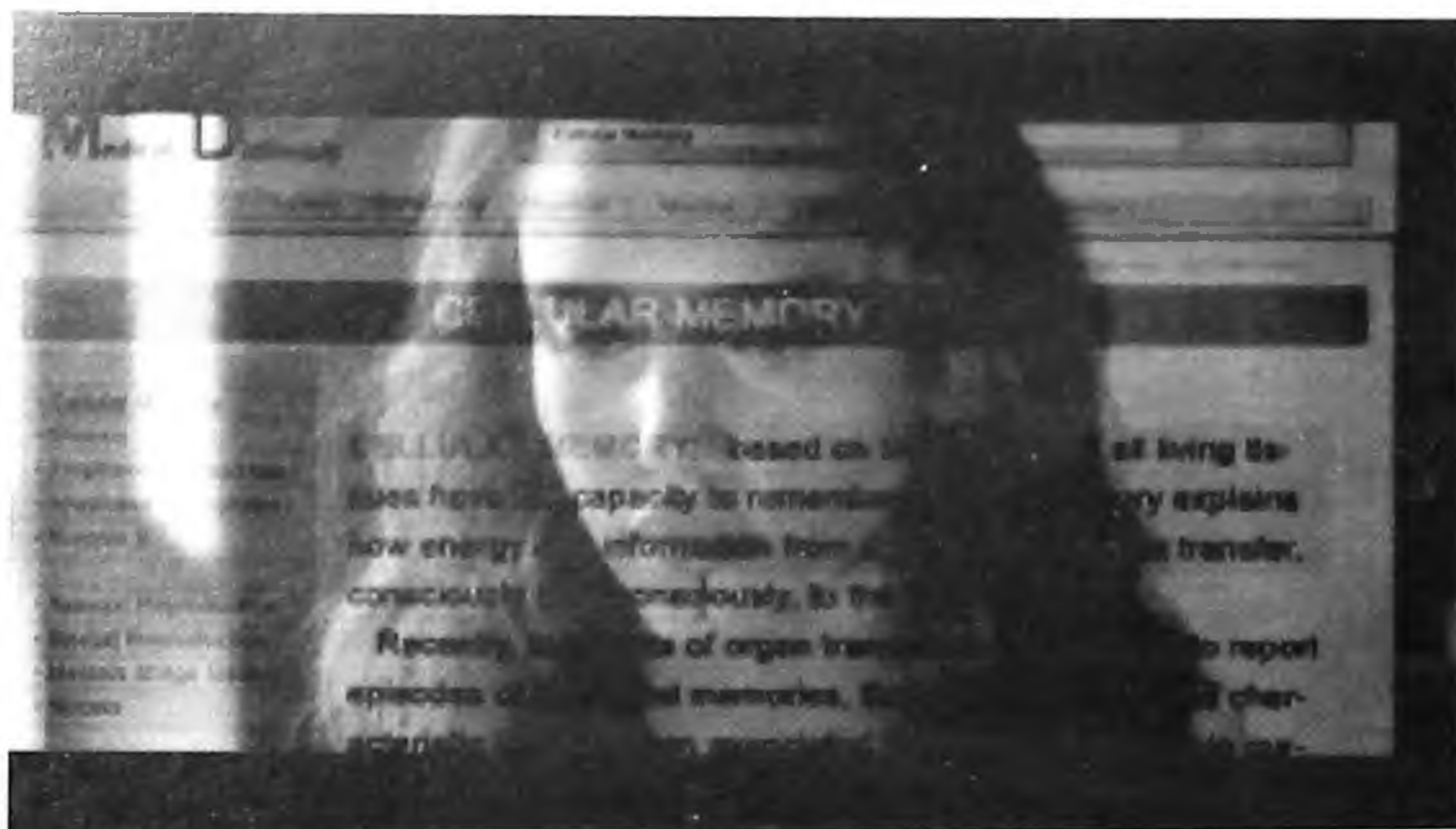
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A similar synthesis of a global icon, Richard Gere, with visual Englishing occurs in the movie, *The Hoax*, visualized in the still below. In this example, he writes as we read. In essence, Richard Gere is effectively photographed behind English.



We see a similar blending of Jessica Alba with visual English as in the following still taken from the Bollywood-adapted, Hollywood film: *The Eye*.

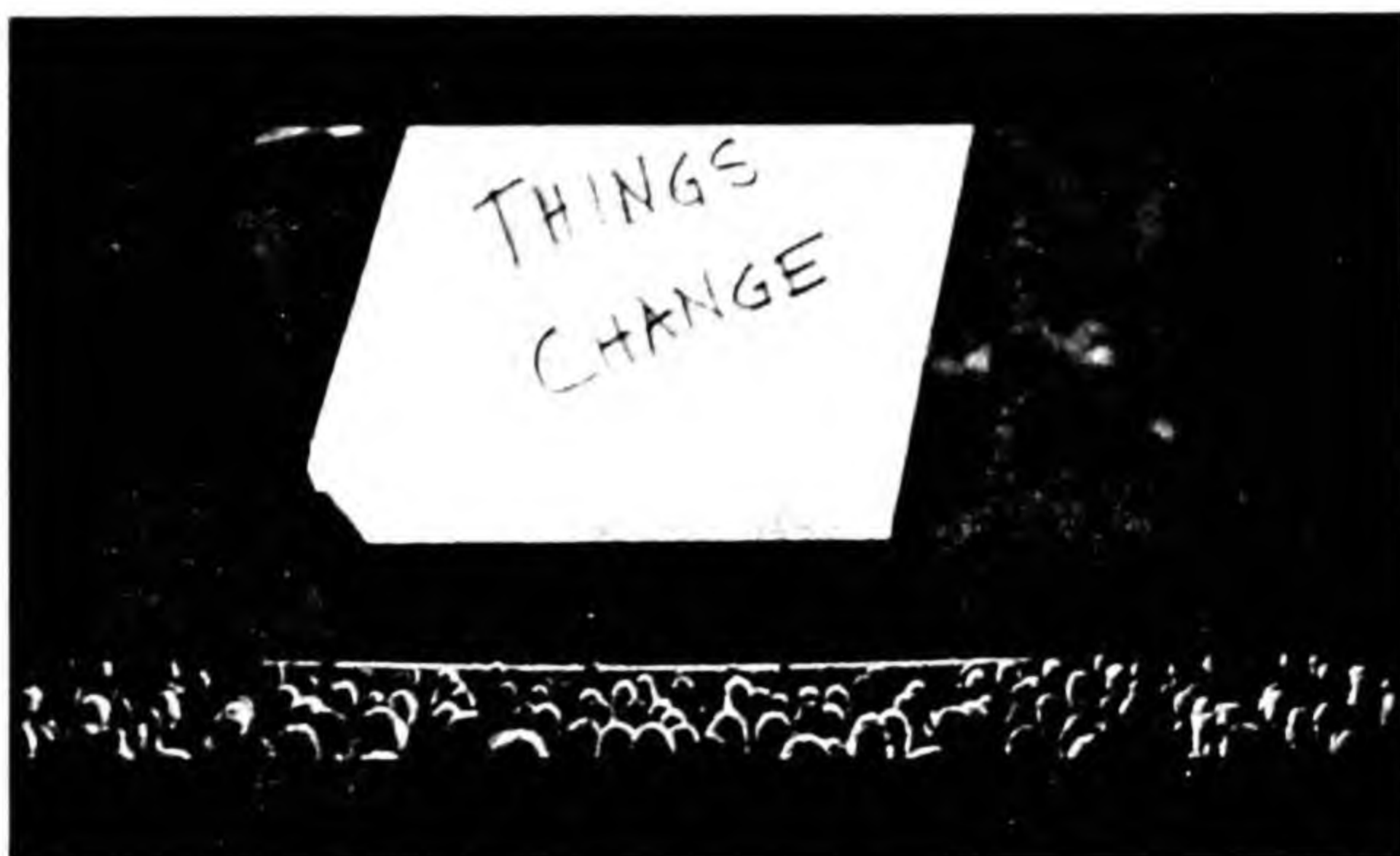


A similar semiotic fusion occurs with Adam Sandler who appears in the film, *Zohan* juxtaposed against a lexical item of universal import—Love.



VISUAL PROMINENCE: THE SEMIOTICS OF SPOTLIGHTING AND SCALE

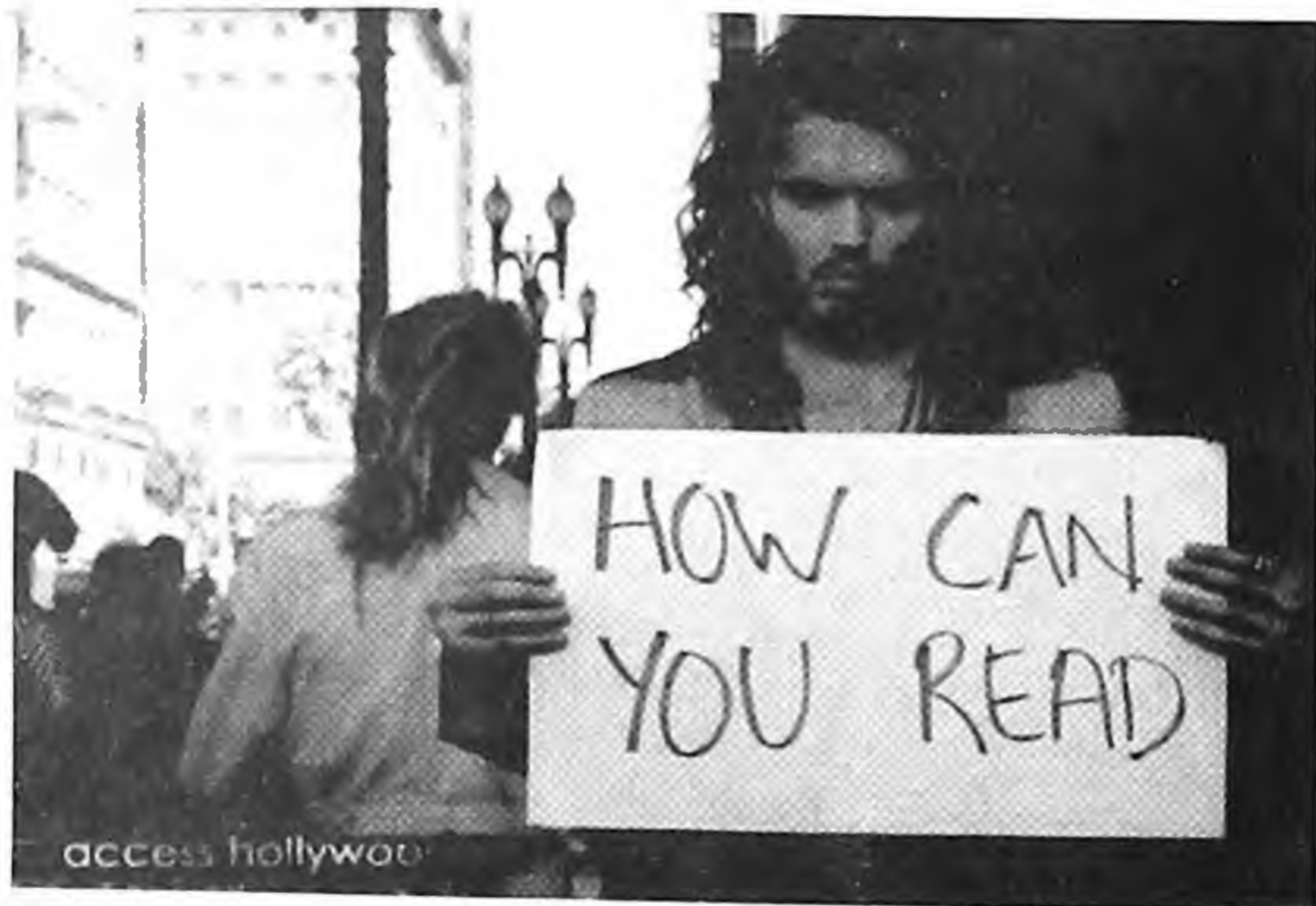
No more powerful an argument for visual English as cinematic strategy exists than the following figure taken from the film *What Just Happened?* in which audience members are filmed engaging in the very act of “seeing English.” The message on the screen while serving as an index of plot details also suffices to effectively demonstrate the role of prominence in cinematic semiotics. After all, visual English takes ‘center stage’ in the shot reproduced below. At this point it is worth asking: Just how big is a movie theater-screen? With most multiplex, standard movie-screens sporting dimensions in the range of 30 by 80 feet, the feature of cinematic scale acquires new metaphoric heights. After all, some IMAX theaters sport giddy heights the equivalent of 8-storied buildings. Few can deny that eight-storey-high visual English is indeed a cinematic device to contend with—further confirming that cinematic spotlighting of visual English has to be moved from the level of the innocuous to the realm of the important.



For skeptics who view visual English as just another accidental filmic inclusion, one need only examine the words of Graddol (2007) whose research keenly tracks the ‘slipping’ position of global English:

In terms of native-speaker rankings, English is falling in the world league tables. Only 50 years ago it was clearly in second place, after Mandarin. Estimating the number of speakers for the very large languages is surprisingly difficult, but it seems probable that both Spanish, Hindi-Urdu and English all have broadly similar numbers of first-language speakers. Some commentators have suggested that English has slipped to fourth place, where its position will become challenged by Arabic in the middle of the present century. (60)

It is no wonder then that strategies of English exportation have to change from the traditional to the innovative. In a cinematic still taken from the highly successful Hollywood-produced comedy, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, audience members are confronted with the following interrogative:



In what can be viewed as anything but accidental, consider the central spot that the English Alphabet gets in the global blockbuster—James Bond film sequel: *Quantum of Solace*. This still, reproduced below prompts us to examine the other ABCD&Es of visual Englishing.



KEY-BOARD ENGLISH: PROMINENCE OF THE ALPHABET

No better advertising for Visual English occurs than through camera pans on a defunct technology obsessively immortalized on Hollywood's screens—the typewriter. This writing device takes on the hallmark of a Hollywood trope in film after film. In the highly acclaimed film, *Atonement*, for example, audiences are treated to several close-up shots of visually unfolding English synchronized to a synesthetic sound-scape spotlighting the staccato strokes of a typewriter.



Audience members read along as words become magnified (30 by 80 feet to be precise), as in the still below taken also from *Atonement*. Visual English takes on the role of cinematic actor.



This same focus on key-board English occurs in the film *Zodiac* with dizzying consistency as seen in the figure below:



A repeat of this strategy occurs in the autobiographical film: *I'm Not There*—another Oscar contender.



In the film, *The Edge of Love*, audiences are once again treated to this image, albeit from a different angle. These are just a few examples from a list of countless others.



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PENMANSHIP ENGLISH

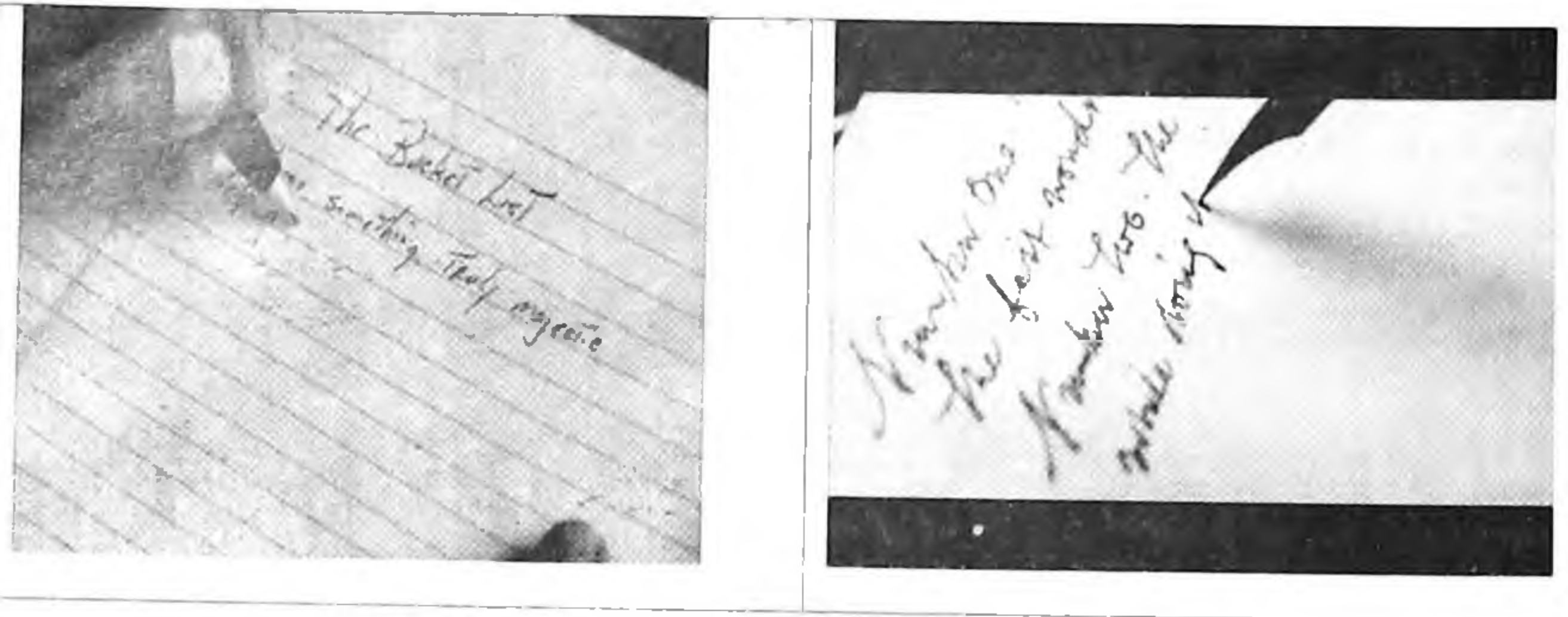
As the screen-shot below taken from the award-winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire* illustrates, English is increasingly being written for audiences to read. In this film, the phrase “It is written” bookends the filmic script so that audiences see the phrase not once but twice—at the outset, and then again at the end.



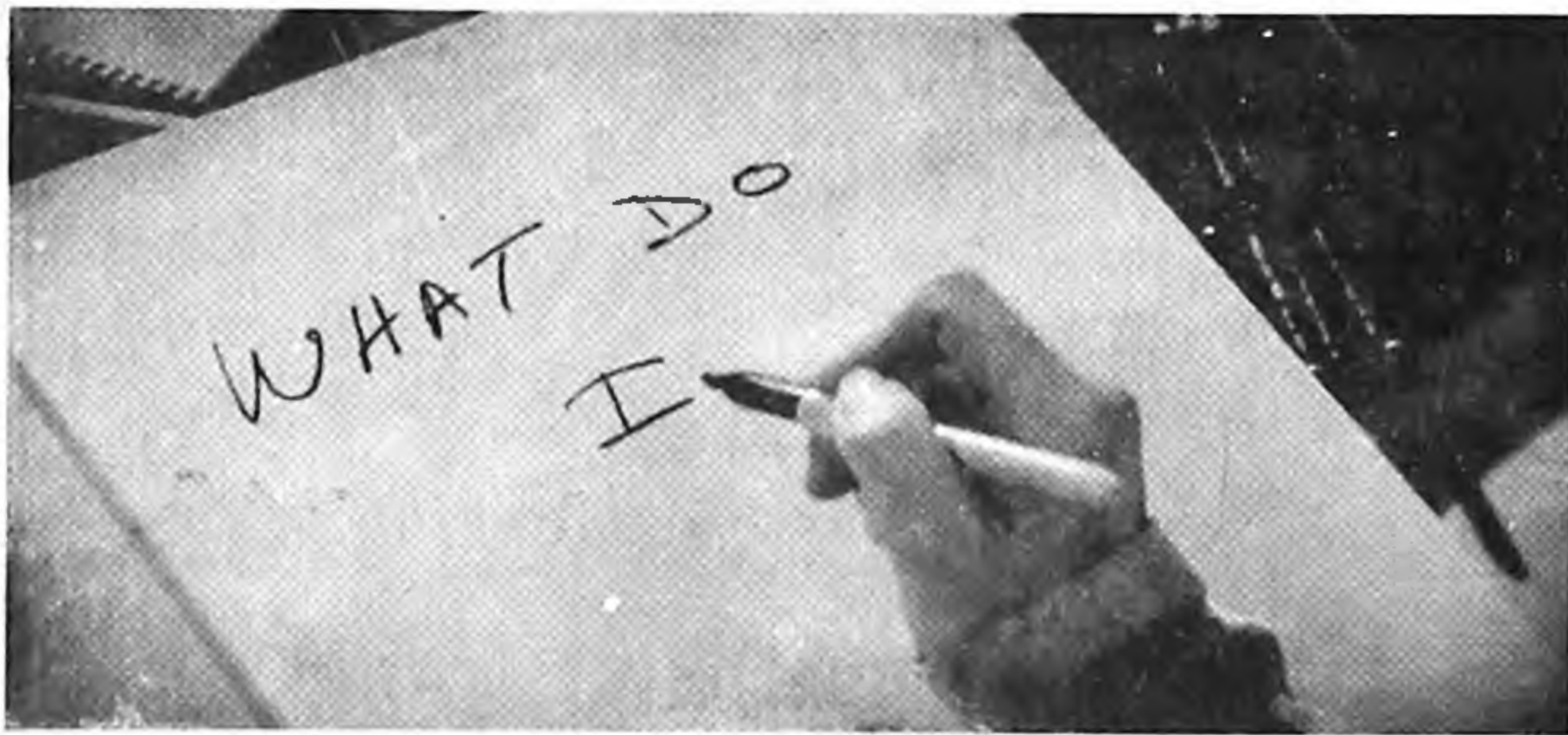
Countless instances of on-screen written English occur in the form of ball-point/penmanship English in which viewers, read English being written in real time. Consider the following two images taken from *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Becoming Jane* respectively.



We see the same focus on on-screen moving English in the comedy *The Bucket List* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*—the latter film ironically adapted from the work of Spanish writer, and Nobel Prize winner, Gabriel Garcia Márquez—into visual English.



Visually unfolding English forms the cinematic thesis of the film: *The Women*. One can predict with facility the words to follow in the following shot:



ELECTRONIC ENGLISH

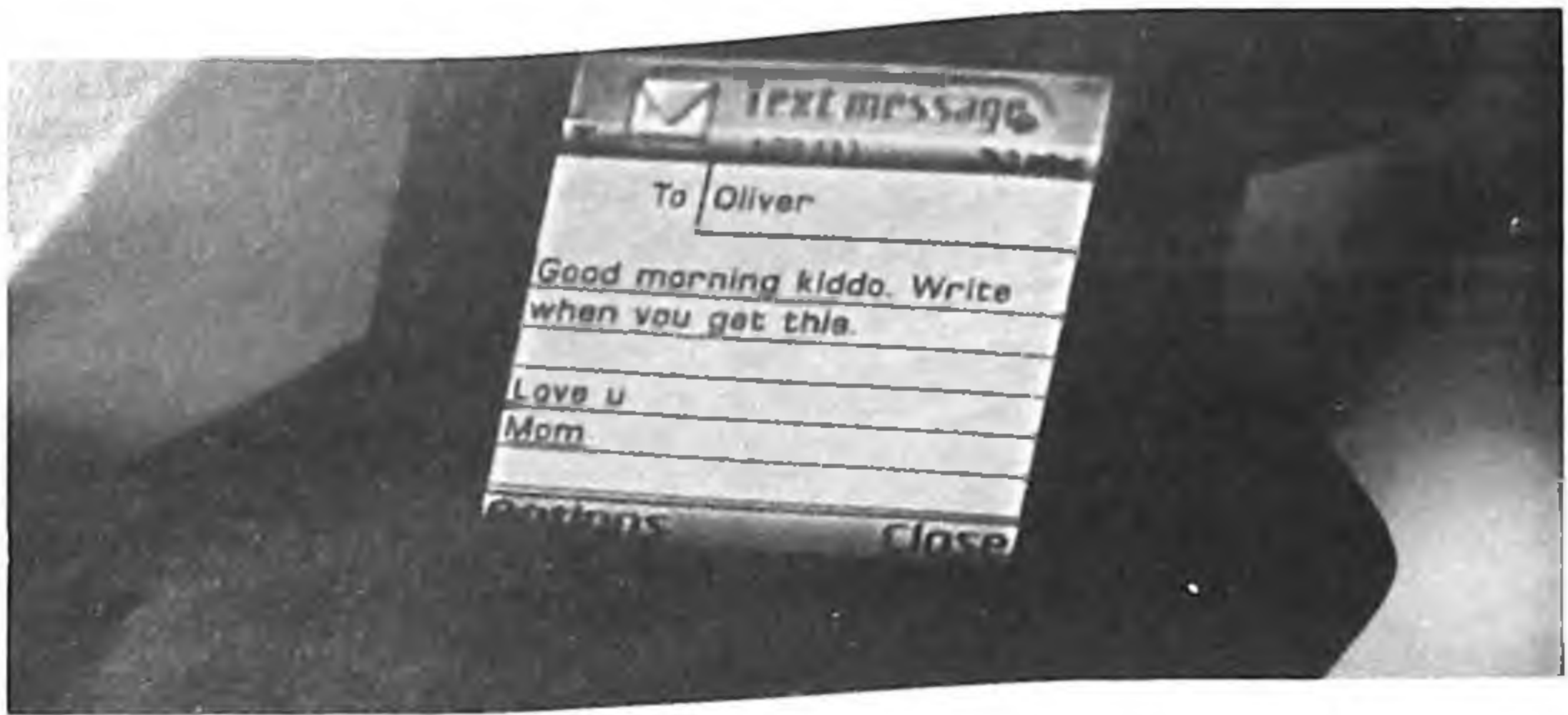
The central place of electronic English can not be ignored. Below is a still from the film *Untraceable*



Cinematic suspense is increasingly being construed in and through visual English as in this example taken from the film, *Deception* where audience members 'read' the message sent by a kidnapper—further heightening the suspense. Films such as these attest to English literacy fast emerging as a credential for film-viewing on a global level.



Text messaging is also a frequent strategy employed to fill in background details as in this message from the science-fiction thriller: *The Invasion*.



The filmic tool of employing 'dynamic' on-screen-unfolding English sees occurrence in the film *Fun with Dick and Jane* where on analogy with a children's beginning reader, audience members are introduced to the film's protagonists via a series of simple visual phrases as shown in the figure below:



This introduction is then followed by a series of labeled expressions which while humorous also permit an on-screen 'reading of English'. The fourth example in the figure below comes from the film *Rock'n Rolla*—where lettering size serves to emphasize urgency for viewing audiences.

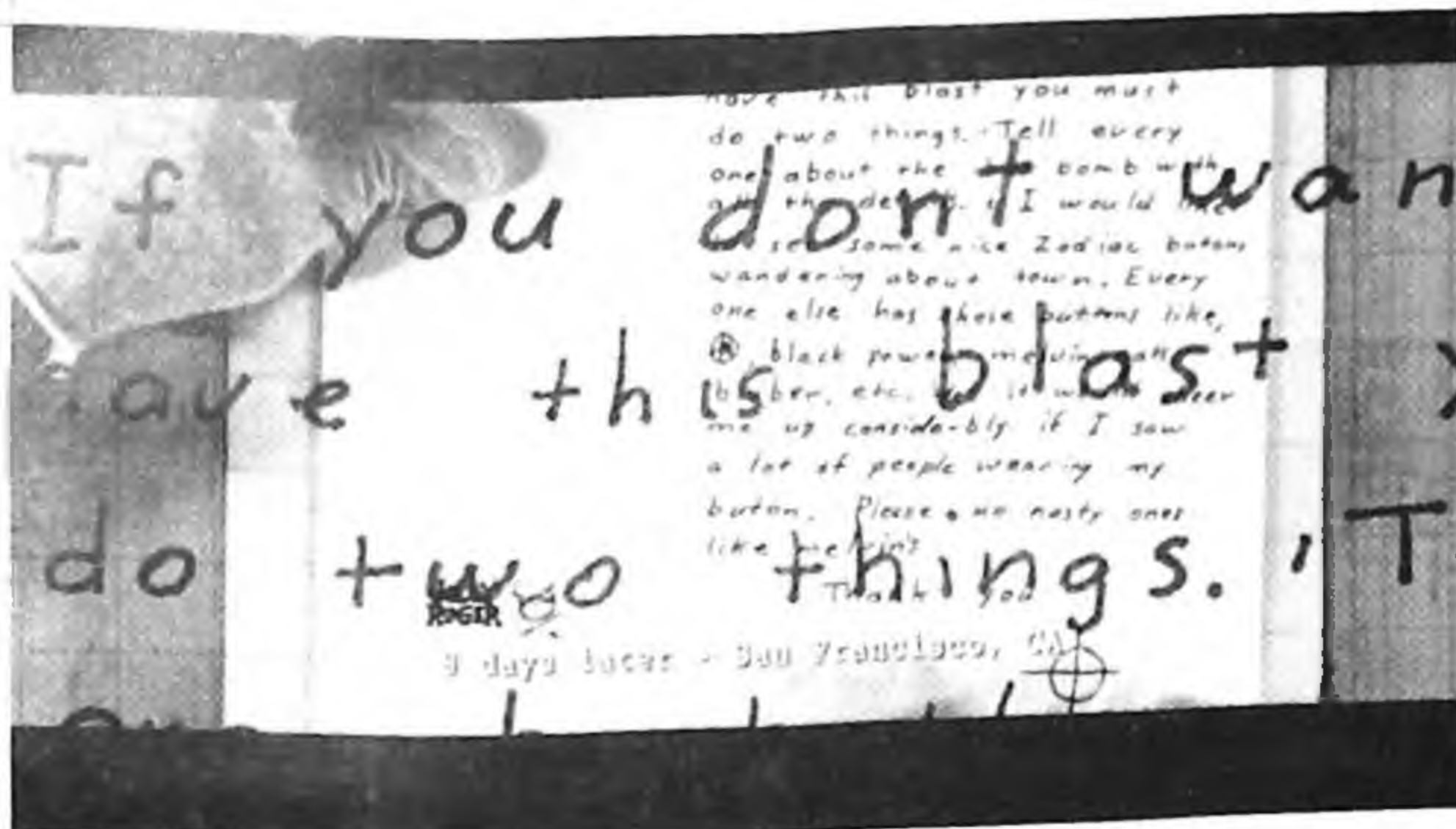
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We see this use of 'highlighted' visual English in the film, *Rock 'n Rolla* where the entire dialog is visually rendered. Again, one cannot fail to notice the use of parallel linguistic structures used for filmic emphasis.



The multiple layers of visual English that can be showcased on film is effectively spotlighted in the film *Zodiac* where visual English clutters every inch of imaginable screen space—captured in the figure below:

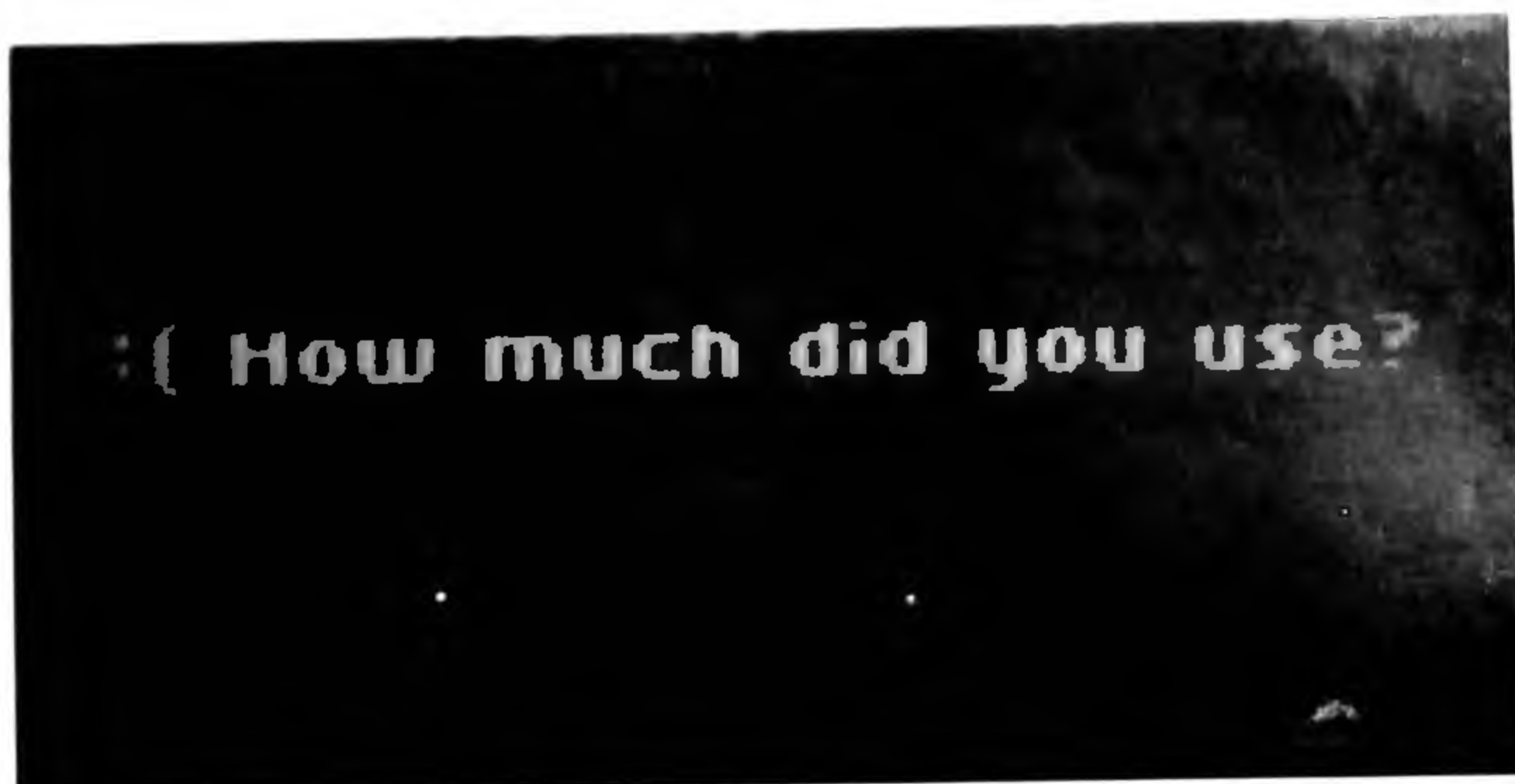


Consider this same strategy of visual clutter in the following scene taken from License to Wed

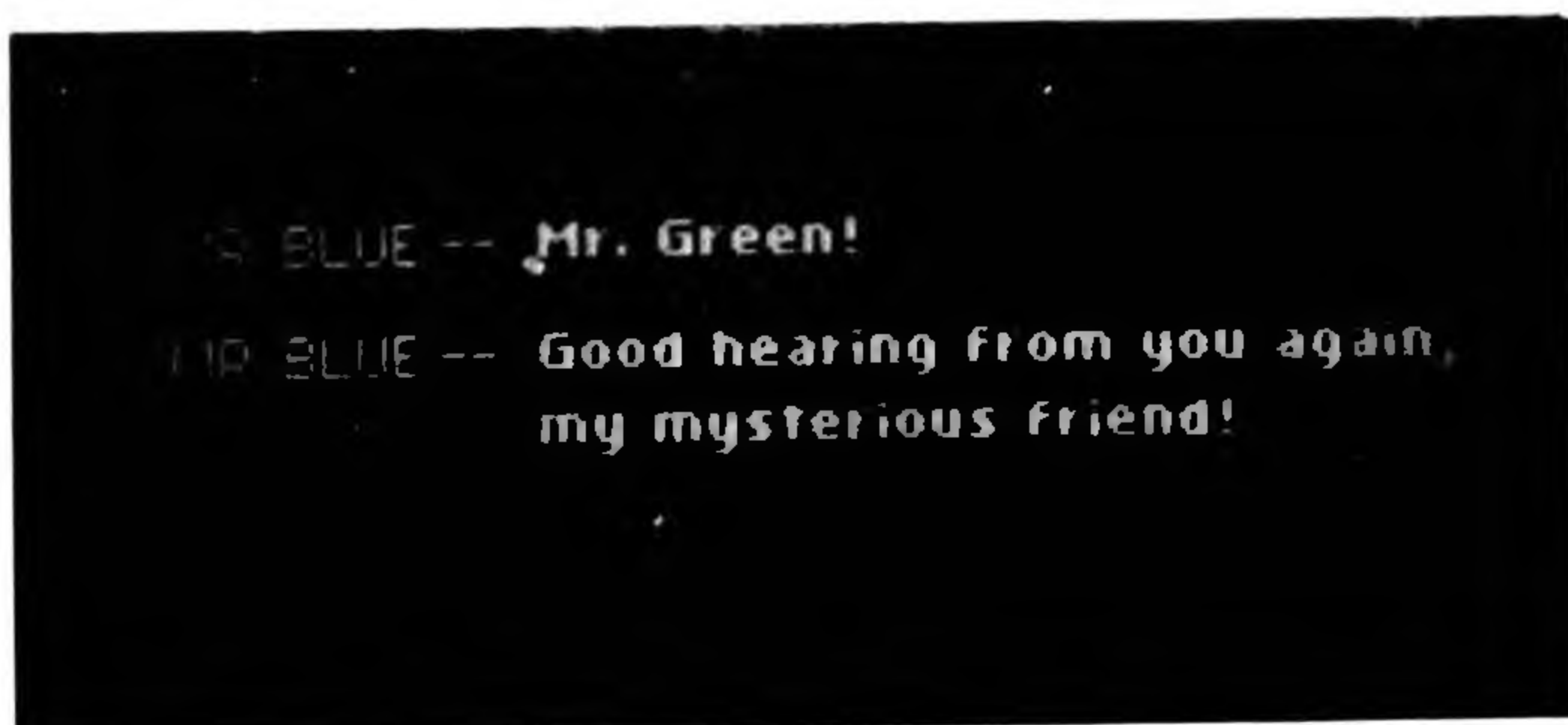


ON-SCREEN ENGLISH DIALOGING

The use of all of the cinematic space to construct “on-screen” real-time visually rendered dialogs forms another consistent strategy in recent releases such as: The Incredible Hulk where the following screen shot is photographed for viewers. This phrase when projected on a 30 by 80 feet screen becomes a powerful semiotic device.



We see several instances of such visual dialoguing as in the still below also taken from *The Incredible Hulk*:



T-SHIRT ENGLISH

Perhaps the genius of Hollywood filmmaking lies in the use of English as foregrounded cinematic content. Even in such uses though, English is photographed as the central visual spectacle in and of itself. The result: visual English occupies prime screen space. There are several screen shots of stylized English—where visual English is the sole filmic object in the cinemascapes that meets the eye. Consider the following creative indexing of the English title of a film on a T-shirt. It is English, and not the wearer of the T-shirt (who is effectively dismembered) that meets the viewers' eyes.



The financial consequences of visual Englishing have been lucrative to say the least. Produced on a shoestring budget of a mere \$15 million, (Wax, 2009: 1) *Slumdog Millionaire* grossed “2.8 million in just the opening weekend” in India alone where it played on “350 screens” (Wax, 2009: 1), and saw an equally “rapturous reception in Britain and America” (Dhaliwal, 2009: par.1). Recent figures show that the film has “taken in nearly \$250 million globally so far” (Chopra, 2009: 18)—a whopping 600% profit margin which does not include its soundtrack sales.

Seemingly static English is often conflated with the filmic strategies of visually unfolding English. Consider the widespread use of T-Shirt English in the films: *Cake*; *Harold and Kumar Escape Guantanamo*; and *The Love Guru* respectively.



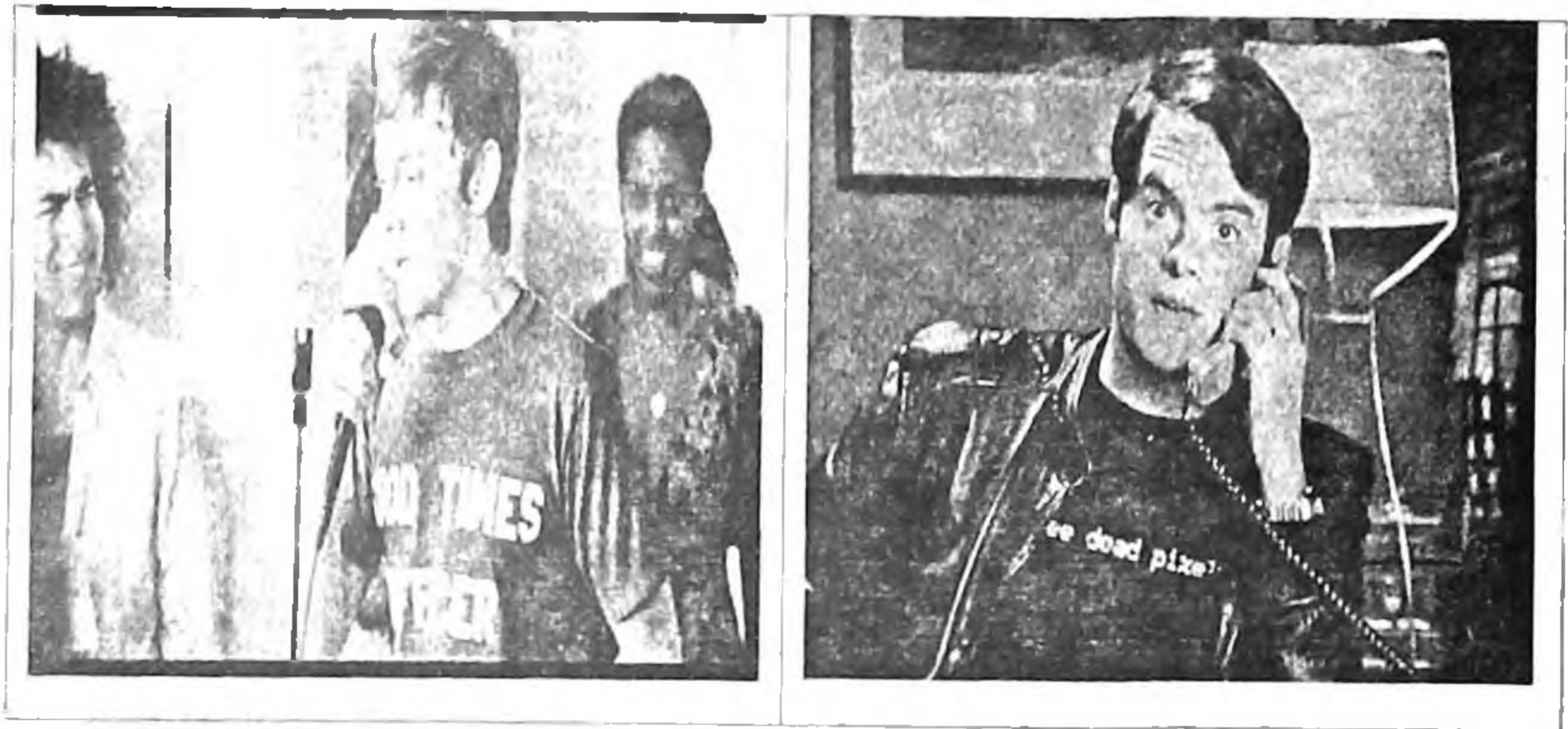
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We see the same use of T-shirt English in the following examples taken from the films *Mama's Boy* and *Mozart and the Whale*.



The use of T-shirt English for comedic effect sees reoccurrence in several films i.e., *Role Models* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* as shown below:



While T-shirt English in the genre of comedy is often used for cinematic commentary, T-shirt English also provides cinematic space for ancillary filmic comment as in the still below taken from the film, *Chuck and Larry* where we are given a cinematic reminder of the unfortunate events of September 11, 2001.



We see another set of instances drawn from other successful films such as *Juno*; *Mr. Magorium's Emporium*; *Zohan*, and *Over Her Dead Body* respectively.



SELLING PLACE; SELLING LANGUAGE

The last example above highlights the manner in which place can become the focus of the camera's eye in film. The on-screen focus of 'static' English often manifests itself in the form of camera shots which showcase place names as in the following seemingly harmless still taken from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.



We see a similar highlighting of place in the film: *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, where London, effectively capitalized, takes center stage.

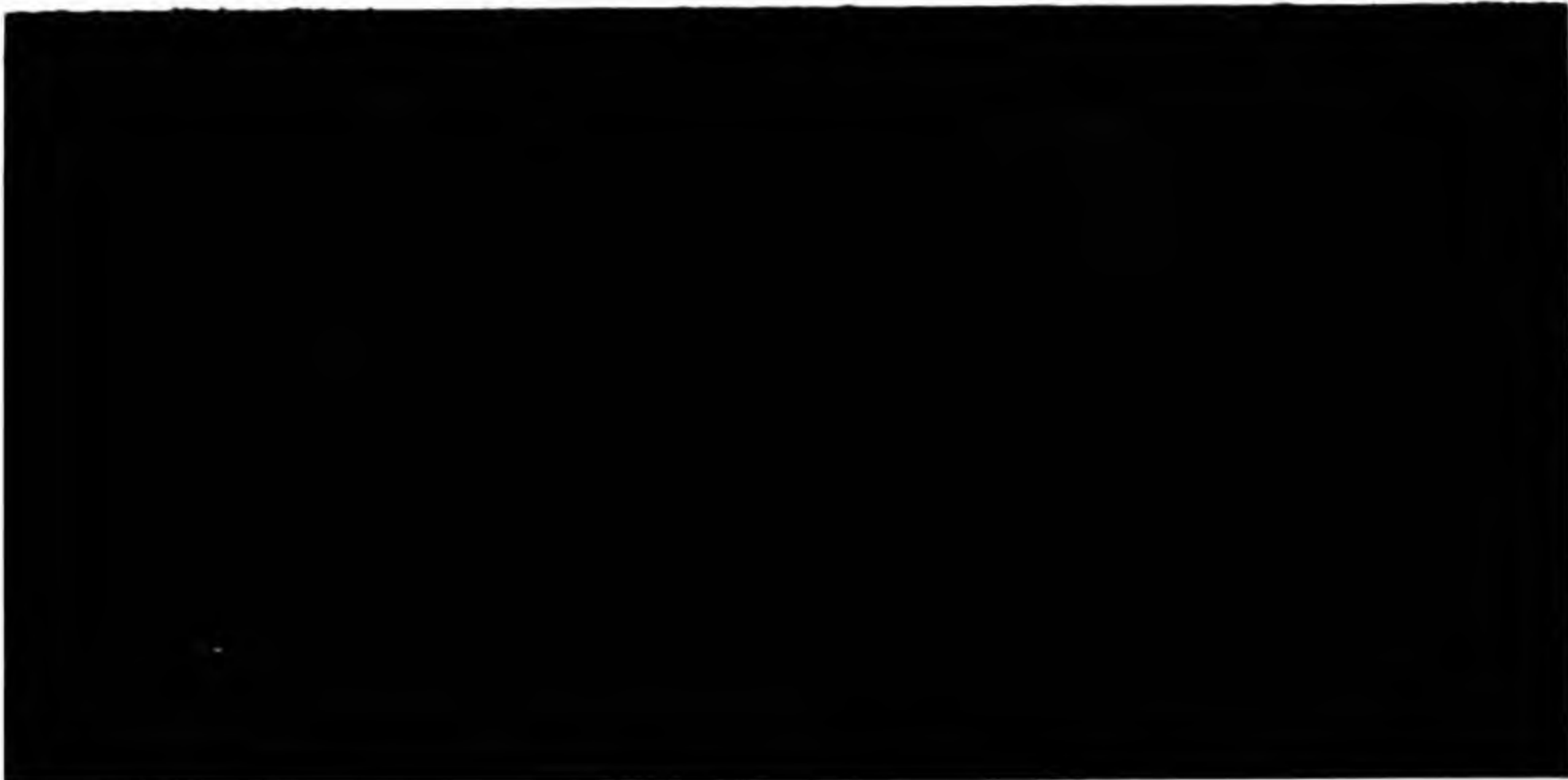


One cannot fail to notice the same strategy of place-marking in a still taken from the award-winning film, *Atonement* visualized below:

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This careful synchronization of English to its 'ports of origin' so to speak, often comes in close-up shots—as the following screen-shot taken from the action thriller: *The Bourne Identity* where one cannot fail to 'see' New York City, and two versions of USA.



SELLING CULTURE: VISUAL LITERATURE

The ultimate effect of such visual Englishing translates as a desire for cultural products. Bemoaning the growing unimportance of native speakers of English from inner-circle countries, Graddol (2007) remarks of a relic—an antiquated empire-building strategy which sees resuscitation in current Hollywood.

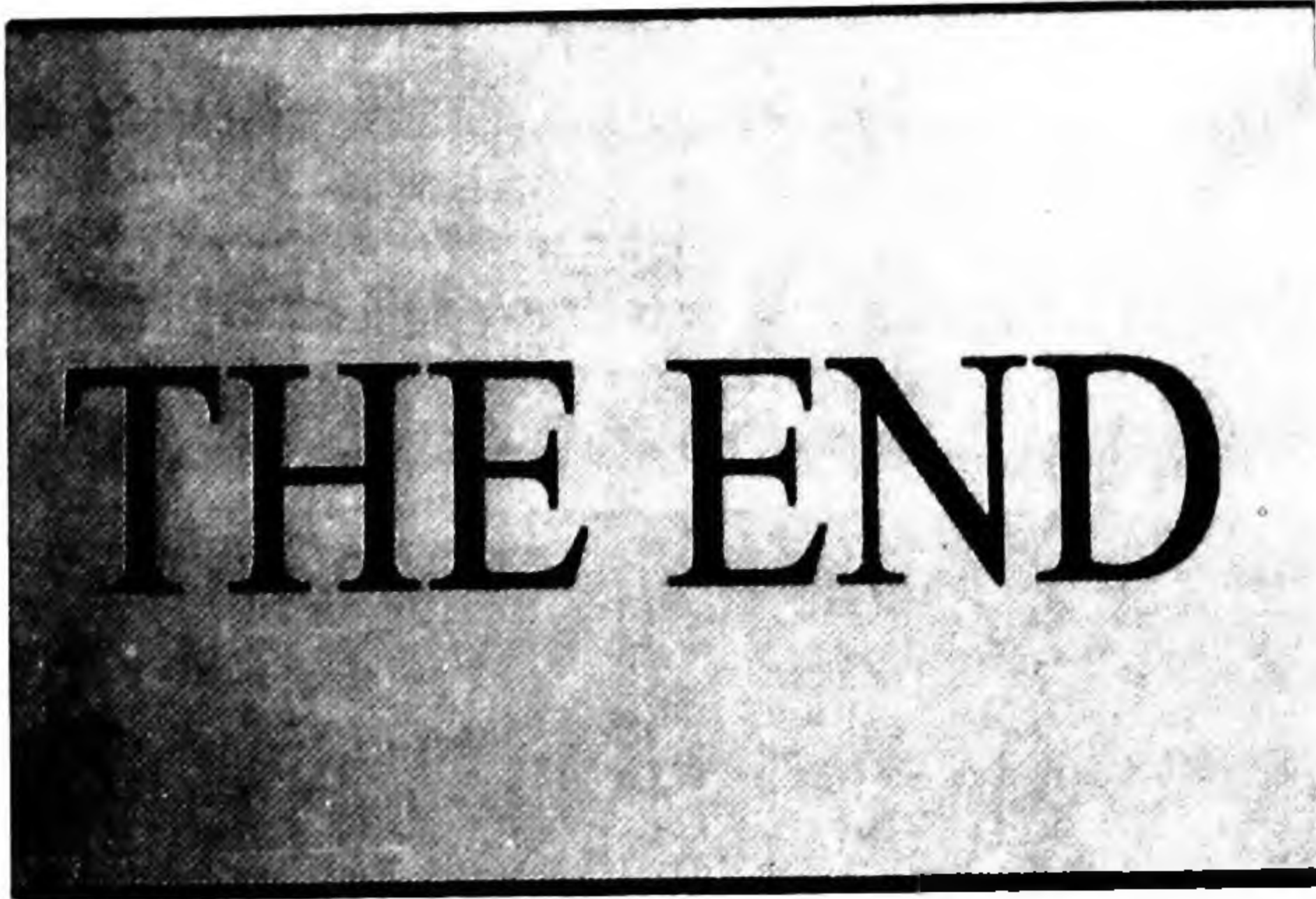
The imperial strategy typically involved the identification of an existing social elite who would be offered a curriculum designed to cultivate not just language skills but also a taste for British – and more generally western – culture and values. Literature became an important strand in such a curriculum and a literary canon was created which taught values through English poetry and prose. (84)

Spotlighting western literature is alive in movie-making today. One cannot dismiss the constant reminders of western literature which constitute both the central thematic content, as well as key visual space in a spate of recent films such as: *The Jane Austen Book Club*; *Youth Without Youth* and *What Goes Up* to name a few examples— stills of which appear below. Perhaps this is why films have been viewed by many scholars as— “couriers of Western values” (Tyrrell, 2004: 328). It is not just the projection of a western ethos on the global arena—a habitus creation for the “values and practices that reproduce center interests” as noted by Canagarajah (2006) (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006:207) that such imagery prompts. Rather, these aesthetic machinations prompt a deeper, long-term response—an “internalizing of center norms” (qtd. in Rubdy and Saraceni, 2006:207). The net result of such cinematic bombardment may explain why in current pedagogy, “the practice of English has been informed by a monolingual consciousness” (Joseph and Ramani, 2006: 186).

Consider the reminders of both classical and modern western literature in the following scenes taken from another recent Oscar-winner, *The Reader*, two stills of which appear below. We see a similar showcasing in the films, *Chapter 27* and *The Company*. This strategy can be added to what Jenkins (2006) has called ‘inner-circle gate keeping’ (33). This filmic detailing lends further credence to the claim that Hollywood’s incursions into the global arena may consist of a triple-pronged imagery strategy: “aesthetic and cultural as well as political” (Tyrrell, 2002: 270).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At this point we may need to heed Joseph and Ramani’s (2006) astute prediction, namely that: “the dominance of English in these domains, while entrenching and spreading the use of English, is also unfortunately eroding the linguistic diversity so central to the maintenance of cultural identities” (187). The following still taken from the film, *World’s Greatest Dad*, makes this point on a visual level.



Asia currently tops the charts when it comes to global linguistic diversity with Africa being a close second—with Asia contributing approximately 33 percent of the current global linguistic diversity and Africa 30% (O'Grady et. al, 2010). India is a terrific case in point in this regard. It is important to note that while 7 of the 20 most widely spoken languages in the world are spoken in India (O'Grady et al, 2010), this linguistic prominence of Indian language is in deep danger of disappearance. Linguistic figures such as this prompt Crystal (2008) to call India a "linguistic paradise" (173). For Crystal (2008) however, it is not India's linguistic diversity which is a cause for ovation, but rather, its potential for English-based monolingualization. Consider the figures Crystal (2008) seems keen on tracking:

The population of India passed a billion a few years ago, and is increasing at the rate of nearly 2 per cent per annum. In 1997, an India Today survey suggested that about a third of the population had the ability to carry on a conversation in English. This was an amazing increase over estimates of the 1980s, when only 4 or 5 percent of the population was thought to use the language. And given the steady increase in English learning since 1997 in schools and among the upwardly mobile, we must today be talking about at least 350 million. This is far more than the combined English-speaking populations of Britain and USA. (173)

The implications of these rising figures are alarming on two levels:

The first is the danger of educated, middle class people world-wide becoming monolingual in English. The second is the social exclusion and isolation from mainstream life for many people in the 'developing world' who have inadequate levels of incompetence in English. This latter phenomenon is linked to the rapid

displacement of local languages by English, and the lack and support for maintenance and promotion of these languages. (Joseph and Ramani, 2006:187)

After all, one need only look at current research which is increasingly pointing to a similar showcasing of visual English in Bollywood productions, often to the detriment of spotlighted Hindi (Garwood, 2006; 2006b). The evidence provided in this paper demonstrates that Visual English as used on the silver screen both privileges as well as entrenches global English evanescence. Consequently, when it comes to screening English on film there is so much more than meets the eye.

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