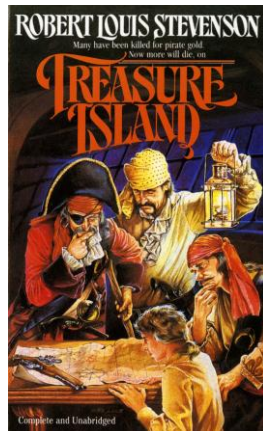


A Comparative study:
Moonfleet by John Meade Falkner
Moonfleet by Fritz Lang
Manon Boukhroufa

Moonfleet is first and foremost a bestseller of youth literature. This adventure story was written by John Meade Falkner in 1898. He could be described as an occasional writer. Indeed, after studying at Oxford, he turned to the weapon industry where he was to make a successful career. Thanks to this employment, he travelled extensively through Europe. It is during this travelling time that he wrote his three novels – *The Lost Stradivarius*, *Moonfleet* and *The Nebuly Coat* - and it is said that he gave up writing after he lost his fourth manuscript in a train.

John Meade Falkner's *Moonfleet* draws from different literary inspirations, but the story is clearly inscribed in the lineage of Robert Louis Stevenson's work *Treasure Island* was published in 1883 and the success of this tale of buccaneering did much to establish a genre to which *Moonfleet* also belongs. The adventures of young John Trenchard take him on a journey of initiation and trials (including a long time in prison) and he returns to his hometown an accomplished man. Set in a secluded village of fishermen and smugglers in an eighteenth-century England, the plot is woven around the legend of Blackbeard Mohune and his cursed diamond. The treasure hunt is absolutely central to the hero's accomplishment; it gives its dynamics to the narrative and also the moral dimension that is required in children literature. *Moonfleet* borrows from the fairy tale its main female heroine. The character of Grace who is the daughter of the hated Magistrate Maskew embodies a very Penelope-like ideal of the pure woman who remains outside the adventures. The last pages of the book sound very much like a fairy tale ending: John is married to Grace and they have three children and the Mohune Manor is restored thanks to the bequest of Aldobrand who returned the value of the diamond he had stolen from him. The bildungsroman



dimension backs up the educational purpose of this book. All is well that ends well to the worthy.



Moonfleet is also a movie directed by Fritz Lang and produced by the MGM's studios in 1955. Hollywood was then a real industry of entrainment where producers had the final cut, budgets were under their control and the latest filming technologies were available. *Moonfleet* was shot in colour and in cinemascope. Fritz Lang came to Hollywood after having already directed a number of important films in Germany. *Metropolis* is maybe the most famous film of his German career. The MGM offered him an exceptional contract at the time but within the logic of the industry. The Austrian director was known for his obsession of controlling everything that happened on and off the set in his films. His recollections of shooting *Moonfleet* are not agreeable ones. He was particularly upset by the producer's decision to modify the ending scene.

In Hollywood, the stars make the movie. If we look at the poster of the film, we only see Stewart Granger. In the foreground, he is sensually embracing a very elegant woman and, in the background all disheveled, he is holding a gun protecting a young creature in distress. Stewart Granger's name is written in big red letters at the bottom of the poster along with George Sanders's. They are both stars in Hollywood at the time and it



is to be noted that neither of the characters they play are in the original novel. Jeremy Fox and Lord Ashwood are complete creations that consequently modify the child-hero central position in the novel, and it is not the only variation from the original that can be found in the film. Indeed, what strikes the viewer at first, are, of course, the major narrative changes.

If *Moonfleet* remains the centre of gravity of both novel and film, the action is considerably altered by the scenario of the film. In the novel, the maleficent power of the jewel has an effect on the course of John's destiny. The initiation of the young boy takes the form of a detoured journey from Moonfleet to Moonfleet where he comes back as a regenerated and moral man, whereas the film drifts away from the initial narrative by concentrating on the fate of the orphan hero in quest of a family, thus introducing new characters and new purposes to the story. Despite the reduction and simplification of the child character, it is retrospectively seen as one of the most beautiful child-parts in American cinema. Hollywood is never short of contradictions and paradoxes such as transforming an English work into an American one by adapting a novel which bears the imprint of Victorian England into a movie produced for an American audience of the 50s'. The scenarists had to deal with complications arising from the Romanesque nature of the novel. Its spatiality is extended; they travel from Moonfleet to The Hague and there are many complex locations such as the prison and the lagoon where the shipwreck takes place, which can increase the cost of the film. The temporality of the novel is extended to the many episodes of waiting for months or for years, that are told by a grown-up John Trenchard some twenty years later. In the movie, the action takes place in a few days which simplifies the cast for the child part and in a relatively restricted perimeter which was exclusively shot in a studio.

"My name is John Trenchard, and I was fifteen years of age when this story begins..."

The first chapter of the novel opens with a first-person narrative but it is a retrospective one. It is from the posture of an accomplished man that the story of his boyhood memories is to be told. This opening is a reminder of the classics of adventure novels such as D. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, whose famous foot imprint will be found in the novel, as well as E. A. Poe's *The adventures of Arthur*

Gordon Pym. The story about to unfold is most particularly one of an initiation to manhood. The boy John Trenchard is the hero of the story. He is an orphan who lives a regular and monotonous life with his stern and austere Aunt Julia in Moonfleet, a poor village by the sea. His thirst for adventure will lead him to fall into the smugglers' cave hidden under the Mohune tombstone during his exploration of the haunted graveyard. This confrontation with fear and obscurity is the first step on his journey to adulthood. Buried alive, he is rescued by Ratsey and Elzevir Block, who then take charge of his destiny. The latter is the tenant of the *Why not?* Inn and the head of the smuggler gang. He is both a figure of authority and of wisdom, the proper guide for John but also the bereaved father of a dead child that John can replace.



A New Color Moonfleet is captured by a band of rare film smugglers.
MGM's Cinemascope **MOONFLEET** In Color

He becomes John's substitute father. His smuggling activity, although illegal, does not make him a villain unable to be a father figure besides when his revenge is at hand, he chooses not to kill Maskew.



The second step of John's initiation also happens underground. After narrowly escaping through the horrendous Zigzag and through the moor, John and Block are on the run. They are charged with the murder of the Magistrate Maskew and there is a substantial reward for their capture. Hiding in Joseph's Pit, an old quarry and known smuggler refuge, and waiting for his broken leg to heal, John becomes aware of the fate that awaits him; his childhood is over and another chapter of his life involves leaving Moonfleet and his beloved Grace. The deciphering of the riddle reveals the hiding place of the lost diamond; thus, two possible roads can be taken by the runaways, a safe road to the continent or a perilous road to the much-desired treasure of Blackbeard. John chooses adventure and Elzevir Block will now be a help in this quest that John has decided upon and which will have dramatic

consequences on his future. There follows the expected and relatively easy discovery of the jewel which leads to the crossing to The Hague where they will be cheated by the diamond merchant and sentenced to the gallows by the Dutch State. The imprisonment time enables both of them to achieve the renunciation of riches and the foundation of deeper moral values which will be eventually put to the test by Block's heroic sacrifice and John's rebirth.

The circle is closed when the boat that was to take them away to the colonies is caught in a tempest and wrecked on the very bay of Moonfleet. The only survivor is John because Block gave his life to push him out of the riff. John is recognized by Ratsey and can start his new life in Moonfleet but this time with Grace in the Manor. He has accomplished his destiny and can now become a respectable gentleman.

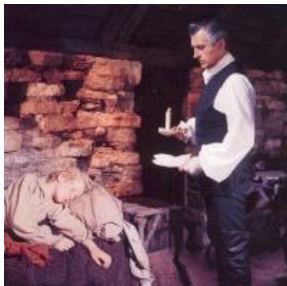


John's return to Moonfleet coincides with the death of Aldobrand, the diamond merchant, who bequeaths the hero all that is left of his possessions to cancel the curse of the diamond, thus making John a wealthy man. He will use this money for the good of the community, restoring the almshouses, dispelling the curse that greed had placed on Moonfleet. The whole narrative has very extended and dilated temporalities. Many ellipses are necessary in the novel, enabling the passing of great lengths of time while concentrating on significant episodes. For instance, the building of the relationship between John and Block takes an important place in the novel. They repeatedly play on an ancient backgammon board and the whole game is ritualized; it is thanks to the repetition of actions or gestures that the intimacy and affection in their father-son relationship is created.

The movie offers a much narrower perspective: the child does not grow up. The scenarists have chosen to discard most of the romanesque elements of the story and dispense with all the geographical detours. There is no trip to The Hague only an escape planned by Jeremy Fox and Lord Ashwood to start a new partnership in piracy that never takes place. They have also deleted

all the expected and dated scenes with the Jewish merchant and the prison in that way centering the intrigue on the world of Moonfleet. Both novel and movie have the same title. It is regrettable though that they should have deleted the beautiful scene of the shipwreck at the end. John Trenchard is now John Mohune, his name connects him to Moonfleet although he arrives as a stranger there. He is a lonely orphan looking for Jeremy Fox, the man his mother sent him to on her death bed as his only friend and protector. John is a well-mannered and polite boy who has nothing in common with the smugglers' world he finds himself in. Never in the movie does he belong to their community. When he realizes that Fox is their chief, he is ready to lie to protect him, his desire to be adopted by Fox is stronger than the moral values of his education. If he did not spend his childhood in Moonfleet, the new genealogy the scenarists have given John connects him with the gentry of the place. Indeed, John is the son of Olivia Mohune and the last descendant of the Mohune family that used to be the lords of Moonfleet. Blackbeard replaced boring Aunt Julia. This new lineage gives John the credibility to claim to be adopted by Fox who now occupies the Mohune Manor. The quest of the father is central in the movie. The question arises in the novel but is resolved by the presence of Elzevir Block who provides him with love and education; in Fritz Lang's version, the boy never manages to have a father.

Throughout the movie, we are given to witness the repeated rejections on the part of Fox who tries everything he can to get rid of him. In the famous scene where John jumps out the carriage, believing to have been kidnapped when all along it was Jeremy Fox who had ordered to ship him away in a school. The obsession of John Mohune is to find a father whereas John Trenchard's is to find the treasure. It is not so much about apprenticeship but about recognition. The relationship between Fox and the child is



ambiguous. Firstly, because we understand that he was Olivia Mohune's impossible lover and hence possibly John's father. To Fox, John is the incarnation of a past which creeps back. They appear to be but two sides of the same person. The discrepancy of age and the confrontation it provokes on the

adult, who sees himself and who he was through the child, could be said to be an allusion to the retrospective first person focalization of the novel. This character created *ex nihilo* by the scenarists occupies an intermediary social position. He is a man who made his fortune in the new world and now runs the smuggling business in Moonfleet and yet rubs shoulders with the local aristocracy. This character is disconnected from the character of the village child and it offers a new perspective and image of the society. The *Why Not?* Inn also changes its name and becomes the *Halberg Tavern*. No backgammon is played or songs sung and alcohol moderately consummated, now it is the house of villains.



The first thing John sees when he awakes from being buried alive are six ugly and mean faces looking down on him.

Lang uses an upshot and subjective camera. The spectators immediately understand that they are the rascals of the story. Block is degraded to a subaltern of Fox and pictured as an equal to the other villains. He even asks for the boy to be put to death because he knows too much about their illegal activities.

The novel and the book stage two different visions of the Moonfleet society. In John Meade Falkner's book, the village people are looked upon with a kind eye. The attention given to the secondary characters such as Aunt Julia, Ratsey or Pastor Glennie populates the village with friendly faces and the reassuring presence of the Scriptures. The minute description of places that have a signification for the life of the community such as the church, the graveyard and the school, give a sense of the sprawling topography and decayed urbanity of Moonfleet. The acute descriptions of the sounds that resonate through the village, in particular the endless noises of the sea and the wind, give a palpable atmosphere to the fishermen village. In the second chapter of the book, entitled "The floods", a powerful storm breaks out. The boy lies safely in bed but his whole room is full with the sound of the storm and images of the roaring sea. The village scenes are the most moving and interesting ones in the novel. They breathe with the harshness of the place and the

fragility of the people who inhabit them. To escape misery, they turn to smuggling though they risk hanging every time they “go out”.

There is a strong sense of solidarity among the Moonfleet inhabitants. The whole community, including the pastor, knows about the smugglers and what is going on at night in this hidden world. Everybody is an accomplice, including the reader who sees everything through the eyes of John, himself an active member of this underground society. Though illegal, their occupation is never perceived as illegitimate. Indeed, the figure of legal authority is the



hated magistrate Maskew. Often away, he resides in the Mohune Manor on the heights of the village. The Manor itself is never described from the interior; it is always out of reach. Wild gardens are surrounding it. Its owner is a cruel and selfish man. He is responsible for the death of Block's young son and deprives

Block of the *Why Not?* Inn. He clearly stands for a justice that is foreign and exterior to the community. Nevertheless, he is perceived as a threat and he defines the prohibited. As far as John is concerned, he represents a double prohibition because of his charge as magistrate but also as Grace's father. This impossible love that is but children's in the novel is echoed by the relationship of Jeremy Fox and Olivia Mohune. The girl they love is inaccessible for the same reason; they are poor. When Maskew dies, killed by his own men, the village spit on his coffin and no one wants to carry it into the church. It is only for the sake of his daughter that he will finally be buried. In the film, the atmosphere is quite different. The world of adults is pictured as vicious and hostile. An impression reinforced by the focalization through John Mohune's eyes.

The smuggler's world is constituted of evil men. Fritz Lang chose to picture them always in groups of three or four to underline their threatening presence. A very long scene is



dedicated to John's discovery of the Mohune vault under the church. First, the camera follows the child as he enters the cave his lantern shedding an encouraging light and then, when the smugglers arrive, forcing John to hide behind Blackbeard's coffin, the focalization is the child's again separating him from the action and turning him into a spectator. The director stages for him a smugglers' reunion which reveals that Jeremy Fox is their chief. From then on, John is always physically outside the circle of the smuggling trade. His clothes and his face also distinguish him from them. The costumes worn by the smugglers have a distinct shabbiness and they are always of grey or brown shades as if a visual reference to their connection to the underground world. Their faces are particularly scaring and even the chaplain Ratsey threatens John with a dagger. Indeed, the Inn is not the welcoming pub anymore. It is now the lair of the outlaws. In every scene set at the Inn, John's life is threatened. One of the most impressive fight scenes is set in the Inn. Block wants John dead because he found out about their cave but Jeremy Fox is reluctant to the idea only because the boy did not betray him to Maskew. They engage in a fight that Jeremy Fox wins, despite having only his sword to oppose to Block's halberd. The circles made by Block's halberd in the air give a spectacular sense of violence and the spectator cannot fail to see he is definitely a rascal.

The addition of the characters of Jeremy Fox and Lord Ashwood introduce a whole new set in the narrative. This aristocratic background is out of John's reach. The connection between the village people and Lord



Ashwood's house is Jeremy Fox. His presence in the cave under the church informs us of his position as leader of the smuggling trade but also, thanks to the contrast of his red and gold courtly costume with the brownish rags of the villains, that he occupies a higher rank in society. He lives in Mohune Manor which has kept its impressive wild gardens. We understand he made his fortune out of plantations in the New World and has come back to Moonfleet. The reason of his leaving is left unexplained but are hinted to: the impossibility of

marrying Olivia Mohune. He was hunted by dogs and still bears the scars of this personal tragedy. When he is not clad in gold and red to attend Lord Ashwood's salons, his clothes are darker and sober though rich and he does not wear a wig. He mingles with the aristocracy but remains an outsider to their world. His ambition appears to be one of social revenge and John's diamond could be a means to a mutually beneficial partnership in piracy between Fox and the Ashwoods. The several scenes shot within their house contrast sharply with the underground world of the smugglers. They are flooded with bright light and ostentatious colours. The salons are teeming with aristocratic gamblers playing cards. Vice and lust rule that world. Lord Ashwood is a selfish and cruel man who was in favour of John being disposed of. Lady Ashwood is a venal woman whose fascination for the diamond in the last coach scene and her seduction parade during an *aparté* between her and Fox portray a woman who is, despite her looks, a prostitute.



The women characters in the movie are far from the evanescent Grace of the novel. Their sexuality is the key to their identities. The gipsy girl, who dances on the table at Fox's gentlemen reunion, embodies a magnetic sensuality. Ana is Jeremy Fox's

concubine. At one point, he chooses to get rid of her and wants her sent back to the plantations where no future can possibly await her since she left everything for him. Those typified characters of women are present in the narrative to meet the spectators' expectations as they contribute to Jeremy Fox's manly power of seduction. This representation of a libertine and decadent Europe is the vision Hollywood often had of eighteenth-century England. Though the film is a very free adaptation of the novel, both works draw from the same genre of adventure story.

The picturesque setting is a fundamental element of romance. Moonfleet is a remote village by the sea and surrounded by the desert moor. Its isolation makes it as self-contained microcosm and

a perfect place where mysterious and illegal things can happen. Its name becomes the title of both works. In the novel, the first chapter is entitled “the Moonfleet village” and opens with a description of the topography of the village. The hero only appears in the second paragraph. This importance is matched in the movie, by the presence of an indicator post. John is walking on the moor and arrives at the crossroad where he sees the signal post. Lang even considered having John going up the post to read the inscription, but eventually decided to add a close up of the name of Moonfleet so we should have the impression of reading it at the same time as the hero. The post signals the adventure and the boy is literally going to embark an adventurous path. Moonfleet is the place where adventure can happen. The atmosphere created around this place is constitutive of the mood excepted by the genre. The juxtaposition of derelict houses with places that are still inhabited gives a sense of sprawling ruin and decay to the village.

The graveyard is also marked by this degradation. It was because it was flooded that a patch of earth crumbled down and revealed the smugglers’ cave. This place connects the world of the living with that of the dead, the upside world with the underground and also legend with reality. An episode in the church epitomizes this symbolic dimension. After the storm, Pastor Glennie celebrates the Sunday service when mysterious thud sounds are heard in the crypt below. At first, they are connected with the Mohunes’ coffins, since their vault is in the crypt but later we find out that they were the smugglers’ casks. The various interpretations of this noise echo the possibilities of romance connected with the location. In the film, this mysterious and frightening atmosphere of the village is rendered by a gothic inspired aesthetic. The statue of the angel protecting the



entrance of the vault in the graveyard has eyes glowing with a supernatural light. It appears twice in a very dramatic fashion and is clearly a source of fear for the boy.

This exaggeration in the gothic vein can also be found in the representation of Mohune Manor. It is surrounded by wild gardens

and ominous archways. It is interesting to underline that in the book, the gardens of the Manor remain a place of order and beauty. It is the playground of the children and a Garden of Eden to which John longs to come back. It is out of the genre's conventions and is connected to the fairy tale dimension of the novel. The landscape of the moor with its dark colours and lowering sky give us an impression of a space constantly tossed by the wind; moreover, most of the scenes happen by night and the hero has only a lantern to light his way. The use of the very dramatic music of Miklos Rozsa adds to the worrying and threatening atmosphere Moonfleet has in the film. The tavern is also an important setting of Moonfleet. In the film, it is a place of vice and corruption where outlaws come to scheme their next felony while drinking abusively. As far as the Inn is concerned the film re-connects with the topos of the genre. The *Why not?* Inn is now the *Halberg* Inn. The new name echoes the action scenes that will take place within the tavern opposing Fox and Block, the latter armed with a halberd... In the novel, it is a paradoxical place. It is a place where the Moonfleet community gathers and is John's new home. This contradiction is epitomized by Block's character being at the same time the smugglers' leader and John's father.

The church would be an important marker of Moonfleet life. Barely seen in the film, it is in the novel a reference for John. This place inhabited by the pastor Glennie is a source of comforting advice. The presence of the sea is also a code of the genre. It is a necessary element to the romance. It offers a perspective out of the closed circle of Moonfleet but it is also a threatening element. Danger and risk are part and parcel of the paradoxical space embodied by the sea. Indeed, the novel is constantly underlining the omnipresence of the sea in all its harshness.



Storms, shipwrecks and floods are suffusing the novel with the power of the sea. At one point, part of the village and especially the churchyard are flooded after a storm and the people are left to do the inventory of all that was destroyed. The sea provides the novel with an epic dimension

which necessary to further the thriller dimension of the story and opening it to a more tragic and symbolic significance. This aspect is particularly developed in the novel. The last scene of the shipwreck is the climax of the novel. It is the sea that brings about the resolution of the story. It connects life with death and ending to new beginnings. The whole village is on the beach trying to save those on the boat. They are not wreckers but risk their lives to save others. Their action is echoed by the sacrifice of Block. It has a Christ-like dimension to it. His death, though it saddens the whole community, is not a failure because it saved John who undergoes a symbolic rebirth. Block achieves redemption when he sacrifices his life for his adoptive son's.

This whole epic dimension of the sea is not present in the film. It is the scene of some actions though very short ones. When they are attacked by the soldier and Maskew is killed, the signification of the scene changes radically. In the novel, it was about a common bonding experience for John and Block. This symbolic dimension was reinforced by the miraculous feat of climbing the Zig Zag cliff. The whole episode is a very monumental and theatrical moment and the escape the two characters manage has something superhuman about it. In the film, it is all about one individual: Jeremy Fox. The scene is now one of betrayal and treason. It is Ana, Fox's concubine, who turned him in to avenge herself from his rejection. When the soldiers attack, Fox has only his own safety in mind and appears at the top of the cliff alone. He also kills Maskew, whereas Elzevir can never become a murderer. This episode is not about a bonding extreme experience but a selfish man evading his responsibilities. The sea is also present in the penultimate scene of the film. Jeremy Fox finally feels remorse as he is about to escape in the Ashwoods' carriage with John's diamond and he jumps out of the coach but Lord Ashwood shoots him. Despite his deadly wound, he successfully returns to the shack near the beach where he left the boy asleep and he gives him back the diamond. After asking John to wait for him, he embarks on a boat. The scene closes with an alternative ending of the boat drifting away with a dead man holding the helm and John waving goodbye at the window. In this episode, the travel to sea is one of death. The sea does not bring reunion and reconciliation, as in the novel, but separation. Indeed, John is an orphan again and left to bereave a 'parent' for a second time. The

sea in the book is associated with love and solidarity, in the movie it is a place of confrontation, treason and separation by death.

Another element present in both works and key feature of the adventure story genre is the treasure hunt. Its riddles, maps and enigmas are the bread and butter of adventure. In the novel, it is intricately connected with the initiation. The trials John faces bring new elements, both to the treasure hunt story and the apprenticeship. The succession of tasks John has to go through are linked with the quest of the diamond. Blackbeard's locker is found at the same time John finds himself a substitute father. The coded verses contained in the locker are deciphered during his retreat in Joseph's Pit, though it has nothing to do with the reasons why he is hiding. Thanks to the materiality of the various elements of the treasure (locket/paper with coded message/diamond), and the tutelary figure of Blackbeard whose greed has brought a curse on Moonfleet, the legend achieves its moral function. In the film, the treasure hunt is reduced to the purpose of restoring a stately house and it is due to his name that enables John to claim a part in the redemption of the Mohunes. The polemical ending is precisely that American vision of a return home. Though the boy lost his parents, he is in good company – orphan Grace and pastor Glennie.

The film closes on John opening the gates of the Mohune Manor in a sunny day in the hope of Fox's return. Lang hated the end, which he thought mawkish and clichéd; he would have wanted the movie to end on the death of Jeremy Fox. His obsession for losses, dead ends and exile were probably too dark and tormented for MGM. No matter how those two works are different, they both provoke pleasure and fright, which is the essence of adventure. Readers or spectators identify with the character of the child and suspense is



born out of this identification. Though the stories differ, we have the same kind of urge connected to the adventure fiction and an adventurer capable of many feats in both. They are now classics themselves and indeed, *Ita in vita ut in lusu alae pessima jactura arte corrigenda est*. As, in life, so in game of hazard, skill will make something of the worst of throws.

Fritz Lang