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Thematic Vacuums: Excising History and Politics in Captain Corelli's Mandolin

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in Captain Corelli's Mandolin

Rachel Wise '06

"It would be impossible for a parent to be happy about its baby's ears being put on backwards."

-Louis de Bernieres

Few in adaptation studies would continue to argue for strict fidelity to the source text. Thankfully, the past twenty years have provided many useful paradigms through which one might approach the study of film adaptation. Posited in Palimpsests (1982), Gerard Genette's concept of transtextuality—all that puts one text in relation to other texts—remains one of the most useful and comprehensive. He introduces five areas of transtextuality. Intertextuality involves framing a text inside another through quotation, plagiarism, and allusion. Paratextuality includes all accessory messages and commentary that surround a text and, in some way, lend themselves to the way in which we approach this text. Metatextuality deals with the critical relation between one text and another, including things like the critic, the literary essay, and bibliographical commentary. Architectuality identifies the re-elongation of a text in a different genre, language, or medium and the generic taxonomies suggested or refused by the title of a text. The fifth area, hyperintertextuality, examines the relationship between the hypertext and its anterior hypotext and the ways in which the hypertext transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends the hypotext (Stam 65-6).

Genette's model provides a useful analytical lens through which one might look at a text and its adaptation; it encompasses much of the discursive practices of our culture, realizing that artistic endeavors aren't conceived in a vacuum, but are shaped by discourse around them. Yet, however comprehensive, even Genette's paradigm does not make allowances for sociopolitical factors. Adaptation studies have yet to provide a schema that fully takes into account the political and historical circumstances that guide the production and reception of particular adaptations. In the case of Louis de Bernieres' Corelli's Mandolin—a novel that deals extensively with the nature of historical recounting and the political and historical circumstances of the Second World War—it's adaptation to film required diplomatic and genre concessions to be made in regards to both content and theme. I would argue that these requirements were so pivotal to the novel—and the romance between Pelagia (Penelope Cruz) and Corelli (Nicholas Cage)—creates a thematic vacuum that removes the very tensions that make de Bernieres' novel so compelling.

Corelli's Mandolin tells a story of the German/Italian occupation of Greece during WWII and the German massacre of Italian soldiers once Mussolini surrendered. The novel has enjoyed relative popularity and critical praise since its 1994 publication. Far more popular within the United Kingdom than the U.S., it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and it is estimated that one out of twenty British households owns a copy (Arrayyo 17). Lured by the promise of an inbuilt audience, what resulted was a collaborative film effort between Universal, Studio Canal, Miramax, and Working Title Films, which promised a potential Hollywood blockbuster. The novel provides all the traits an audience—whether English or American—usually salivates over: romance, intrigue, war, and a potentially epic quality a la The English Patient. Add to that the star power of Nicholas Cage as Corelli and the beautiful scenery of the Greek island of Cephallonia, and it seems that adapting Corelli's Mandolin to the screen would be a full-proof plan. Lauded as the "big date movie of the summer" (Maryles 19), an aura of anticipation and expectation of box office success surrounded the movie's release. A major studio production, it was the first movie by director John Madden since his Oscar-winning Shakespeare in Love—a movie that was extremely popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet most critics quickly panned Captain Corelli's Mandolin, calling it "a disappointing follow-up" and "sluggishly paced" (Rezeen 35). And in fact, it would seem the movie-going public would agree; the film only recouped $25,528,495 of its $57,000,000 budget in U.S theaters.

So what specifically went awry in the conception of a movie that should have had enormous mainstream audience appeal? It would seem the problems with adapting de Bernieres' novel have, in part, to do with the discursive nature of the novel itself. It is a novel that does not fit neatly into the structure of your typical dramatic narrative. Reviewers of the novel have failed to arrive at any consensus as to what is the "central" theme of Corelli's Mandolin. The BBC, while promoting "The Big Read" campaign, remarked that de Bernieres captures "the human values and eccentricity that persist amidst the horrors of war." A reviewer in the New Statesman rather felt "the central theme is not really war at all, but everything good which is threatened by war, and the captain's music is a fitting enough symbol for this" (Holland 64). I would argue that the novel revolves around...
discussions on the nature of history itself. After his acknowledgements, de Bernieres remarks, “Much of what I have written consists of hearsay tempered with myth and hazy memory, which, of course, is what history is.” Any reader may look at the table of contents and quickly see that the novel is shaped by an eclectic compilation of sources and viewpoints. Letters, speeches, myths, monologues, Dr. Iannis’s history, even a propaganda pamphlet are interwoven to create a history of Cephallonia. Carlos, an Italian soldier whose viewpoint we get, remarks in his earliest chapters that “history ought to consist only of the anecdotes of the little people who are caught up in it” (33), and, in part, this is exactly what de Bernieres’s novel does. Increasingly cynical, he later remarks, “history is the propaganda of the victors” (33).

The discussion of what history should and shouldn’t be, and who has the right to retell it, provides the very dramatic tension and anxiety that drives the sweeping narrative. But theorizing is not the stuff major Hollywood films tend to include. Tim Bevan, the film’s producer, remarks that “Dr. Zhivago is the movie we’re making… A big epic romance. [T]he argument over the politics and the civil war is as dull as dishwater as far as we’re concerned. This is what we’re about is maintaining an emotional throughput for 100 minutes” (qtd. in Phillips). The film presents a streamlined narrative in which there is no sense of novel’s multiple perspectives or the sociopolitical factors that shape them. It also isn’t made clear that Dr. Iannis is writing a history of the island. Instead when the film enter the film with Dr. Iannis, played by John Hurt, narrating as if his character is writing a letter to Correlli, and it seems that this imporing correspondence is the frame under which the film is to be viewed and understood. But PASOK, Greece’s rightwing social democratic party, threatened to take them to International Court of Justice because those “slanders” were not excised. After negotiations with the party leader, Madden and Savlo rewrote much of the film’s original script, which included cutting the attempted rape and hanging a “collaborator” is the closest we come to disliking anyone. It is a poor substitute for his attempting to rape Pelagia who always manages to tell offensive jokes at precisely the wrong moments, should appeal to her instead.

Why would Madden and Savlo choose so drastically to alter Mandras? In posing this question, one reveals the crucial oversight in Genette’s schema. For in the case of Correlli’s Mandolin, sociopolitical factors had far more to do with the character as a collaborator than even genre conventions. The fact is that the political stance of the novel is highly controversial and presented a multitude of problems for Madden and his producers. Though the film was not politically charged, it had traditionally been history’s “good-guys,” and so inflammatory did some find certain sections of the novel that parts were actually omitted from the Greek language edition (Phillips). Madden and his team wanted the decided advantage of filming on location, but PASOK, Greece’s rightwing social democratic party, threatened to take them to International Court of Justice because those “slanders” were not excised. After negotiations with the party leader, Madden and Savlo rewrote much of the film’s original script, which included cutting the attempted rape and depicting a more diplomatically conceived version of Mandras (Phillips).

After this meeting, scenes were also added to demonstrate some resistance given to Italian troops by Greek peasants (Phillips). In the film’s commentary, Madden reiterates that certain details in the film and changes made adapting the novel to the screen were influenced by the magic words, “I love you,” will be spoken, that love will prevail, even in the midst of brutality. The film’s lovers somehow miraculously come to love one another in a century that has come to be understood as an age of nationalism. Without the political and historical dialogue of the novel, the relationship is a mere skeleton that is both withered and uninteresting. Perhaps, as men and women, as there are the other usual genre and medium constraints to take into consideration: simplifying the narrative, condensing the novel’s timeline, and eliminating the discussion in particular of the political and historical. What we witness is not a technical adaptation for which there is no adequate critical paradigm to address the unique story behind the making of Captain Corelli’s Mandolin. If Genette’s model is to analyze all that puts one text in relation with other texts, perhaps we should expand our notion of a “text” to include sociopolitical discourse. For the ways in which we evaluate texts quickly shift and come to understand the past is a “text” of its own, a “text” which greatly influences the way certain (or perhaps all, to greater and lesser degrees) adaptations are far from the ideal scenarios audiences expect in a romantic film.

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produced and received. One simply cannot understand the evolution of this Corelli's Mandolin adaptation without looking at the political and historical issues—particularly as they pertain to nationalism—Madden and Slovo had to take into account. This suggests something fundamentally true about adaptation studies. While it is useful to have such critical approaches, as in the case of Genette's transtextuality, each adaptation must be approached from an angle unique to its situation. And the schemas with which we analyze texts and their interaction with the world should be malleable and dynamic.

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