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

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*"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 *Palimpsestes* (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. Architextuality identifies the re-elaboration 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, hypertextuality, examines the relationship between the hypertext to an 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 history of the Second World War—its adaptation to film required diplomatic and genre concessions to be made in regards to both content and theme. I would argue that these outside pressures primarily helped shape the film adaptation and that the consequential excising of political and historical themes 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's 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 (Arroyo 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 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" (Rozen 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's 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' 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, remarked 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 ditchwater as far as we're concerned. What this is about is maintaining an emotional through-line 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, we enter the film with Dr. Iannis, played by John Hurt, narrating as if his character is writing a letter to Corelli, and it seems that this imploring correspondence is the impetus behind the movie, which then becomes, in large part, a flashback. It is a flashback that focuses on the "big epic romance" between Pelagia and Corelli, firmly planting the film in a genre well-received by mainstream audiences, concentrating on one element of the narrative used by de Bernieres to explore a little-known WWII event.

In the movie, Mandras (Christian Bale) makes up the third part of a rather tiresome and ineffective love triangle, occupying time and space that might have been better spent successfully developing a believable relationship between Pelagia and Corelli. In the novel, Mandras operates as one of the "little people" through which de Bernieres explores the partisan movement, but as the adaptation focuses on the romantic plotline, Mandras has little thematic importance. And he is just too likeable (and significantly more attractive than Cage, some might say). Perhaps wishing to make Pelagia's decision more difficult, Madden presents an extremely sympathetic character. Choosing to have Mandras, rather than the novel's Velisarios, find and save Corelli from the Germans angered by Italy's surrender, he must give Pelagia the reason for such a noble action. . He brokenly explains, "I wanted you to love me again." When Pelagia returns his ring, we see a pained Mandras, very unlike the novel's corresponding character who tortures Pelagia with her decision, one who exudes a grotesque maliciousness. As an audience, we have nothing for which to condemn Mandras. His failure to stop the two partisans from hanging a "collaborator" is the closest we come to disliking him. It is a poor substitute for his attempting to rape Pelagia in the novel. We are left wondering why she *wouldn't* love this passionate and generous man, why the Italian Corelli, who always manages to tell offensive jokes at precisely the wrong moments, should appeal to her instead.

Why would Madden and Slovo choose to so drastically alter Mandras? In posing this question, one reveals the crucial oversight in Genette's schema. For in the case of *Corelli's Mandolin,* sociopolitical factors had far more to do with the refashioning of the romantic story line 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. The partisans de Bernieres depicts so negatively have 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 if certain "slanders" were not excised. After negotiations with the party leader, Madden and Slovo rewrote much of film's original script, which included cutting the attempted rape and depicting a more diplomatically conceived version of Mandras (Philips).

After this meeting, scenes were also added to demonstrate the assistance given to Italian troops by Greek partisans (Phillips). In the film's commentary, Madden reiterates that certain details in the film and changes made adapting the novel arose from the accounts of surviving Cephallonians who described their perception of events. The implicit judgment he seems to be making is that de Bernieres got it wrong. For instance, Madden remarks on the dance that the Italian soldiers organized to "extend the hand of friendship" to the Greeks. He said, "This scene has no counterpart in the book, though it probably again did in real life. I was looking for a way to allow the audience to experience the thawing of hostilities, to compress the process by which I suppose the Italians and Greeks, as it were, surrendered to one another." This in particular, reflects a real anxiety and the need to reconcile the Greeks to their Italian occupiers. Madden sought to show how the "two sides fell in love with one another," so that "the occupation became utterly benign." Madden's adaptation provides a condensed and oversimplified version of the complicated interactions between nations during WWII. The Nazis are both history and film's easy bad-guys, and the Italians quickly assume the stereotypical role of fun-loving, opera singing young men.

Wishing to resolve the tension between the Greeks and Italians, however historically accurate Madden might believe it to be, drastically affects the romantic plotline. Within the film the lovers are given little context until the Italians surrender, almost 100 minutes into the movie. Everyday life on the island seems to go on almost as normal. We do not see an emaciated Pelagia or the difficulties in finding food and fuel. The endearing pine marten, Pipsina, is not cruelly clubbed and the goat, which Pelagia is so proud to own and care for, is not stolen by other starving people.

In the novel, there is a reason that the relationship between Corelli and Pelagia is chronicled by chapters entitled "A Problem with Eyes," "A Problem with Hands," and "A Problem with Lips." Corelli realizes he is the reason for the stares Pelagia receives in town, that his nation is responsible for the islanders' slow starvation. And Pelagia feels like and is looked at by many as a traitor. These interior wars, the ambivalence and reluctance to give way to their feelings, gives the lovers their attractively bittersweet tone that makes their romance so unique and captivating. It is their historical grounding that reminds us that, while we are rooting for "love to conquer all," it offends their sense of decency in a time of war and division. The novel features a couple that cannot escape national identifications and political situations surrounding them. Corelli and Pelagia—the evolution of their interaction and their future—are inextricably caught up and shaped by circumstances around them.

In the film, Pelagia's politics are never an issue. There is nothing of her stubbornness, and all that she requires is a few declarations of Corelli's affection. In smoothing things over with the Italians and muting the fact that Corelli is an *invader*, Madden successfully removes essential dramatic tension from the romantic plotline. Why *shouldn't* Pelagia love an Italian when the Greeks seem so utterly delighted to entertain their imperialist friends? There is virtually no doubt that those three magic words, "I love you," will be spoken, that love will prevail, even thrive, in the midst of brutality. The film's lovers somehow miraculously manage to transcend national identity and politics 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 weak and uninteresting. Perhaps that Pelagia and Corelli themselves, in part, come to represent national identity—as understood by the reader through "anecdotes of the little people who are caught up in it"—during a time of war and division, makes it difficult for the romantic storyline to fill the thematic vacuum left once the history and politics in de Bernieres's novel are excised. The story collapses in on itself. As reviewer Peter Travers remarks in *Rolling Stone,* "Director John Madden and screenwriter Shawn Slovo have hacked the book down into something picturesque, respectful and emotionally flat" (116).

Hacking away, Madden condenses the novel's sixty-year span (1940s-1990s), changing an ending that would be far from the ideal scenario audiences expect in a romantic film.

The film's earthquake occurs in 1947 instead of 1953, and Corelli soon returns to Cephallonia, prompted by the assurances in Dr. Iannis's letter that Pelagia is still very much in love with him. Cage appears onscreen, perhaps a little grayer around the temples and says "I tried to stay away. There is the loss of a few years in the lover's relationship, but no one looks old and worn out. Certainly Corelli's absence in the film is nothing compared to the fifty-year gap in the novel. No civil wars ravage the Greek islands because of the political and governmental vacuum left in the wake of Italian and German invaders. In fact, it would seem that Madden would have us believe that nothing has changed from the start of the movie until its finish. We open with the festival of St. Gerasimos and end similarly with its celebration. When Dr. Iannis writes to Corelli he refers to Cephallonia as "our island untouched by time." Not only is this depiction of the full circle a dangerous type of nostalgia—one I think de Bernieres campaigns against in the novel—but the film loses that which makes the book so tragic and memorable. There is no sense of cheated youth and wasted time. In the novel, the reader feels the disappointment of the two lovers who miss out on a lifetime together—Pelagia's disappointment made analogous with that of Greece. Ironically, the very historical and political issues eliminated in the film shape the couple in the novel. Corelli and Pelagia—the evolution of their interaction and their future—are inextricably caught up and determined by circumstances around them. Without the political and historical dialogue of the novel, the relationship is a mere skeleton that is both weak and uninteresting. We are left with an unsatisfactory, seemingly disingenuously manufactured ending to cap off a very poorly-portrayed romance.

Granted, some of the blame for the disingenuous romantic storyline must be attributed to a rather hackneyed script full of lover's clichés, poor acting, and lack of chemistry between Cruz and Cage. One gets the sense that our major characters—played by an Italian-American Cage, a Spanish Cruz, an English Hurt, and Welsh Bale—where chosen for star appeal and respectability. And certainly, as mentioned, there are the other usual genre and medium constraints to take into consideration: simplifying the narrative, condensing the novel's timeline, and eliminating the discourse on history and politics. What I was not prepared for was encountering an 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 the present 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

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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