

## THE SUPERFLUOUS AND THE MISSING METAPHOR IN *IL POSTINO*

**Raffaele Lampugnani**

### **Sommario/ Abstract**

*Partendo dallo spunto di Jeanne-Marie Clerc, che propone un metodo sociocritico per analizzare la riduzione di testi letterari per lo schermo, questo saggio vuole esaminare il film *Il postino* di Michael Radford per stabilire in che modo è riuscito o meno a superare i problemi di interpretazione e ritrascrizione degli elementi stilistici e culturali presenti nel testo originale. Una lettura attenta dei due testi dimostra che il regista non è riuscito a ricreare un contesto socio-culturale e politico nell'ambiente italiano coerente come l'originale, per cui alcune immagini e metafore risultano incoerenti e superflue.*

*Il postino* (1994) is a film that has enjoyed considerable success both in Italy and abroad, receiving five Oscar nominations and winning one for its musical score. The very favourable reception at its premiere in Rome and Milan, and at its screening at Venice in 1994, is without doubt linked in viewers' minds to the life and work of Massimo Troisi, one of Italy's most respected and loved actors, whose heroic determination to complete the film in spite of ill health inspired many. Troisi died soon after shooting his last scene in the film that has been termed Troisi's artistic and spiritual testament:

*Il postino* è un film che porta qui e là i segni tangibili dello sforzo sovrumano di un artista [...] della fatica e del sacrificio

di un autore che ha forzato il romanzo di Skármeta cambiandone il finale con inquietante lucidità premonitrice e facendo coincidere la morte fittizia del protagonista con la propria reale... (Castellano 2001: 14)

Able promoted by Miramax on the American continent in 1996, the film also became financially successful by Italian standards, as Nino Randazzo proudly reported in Melbourne's newspaper *Il Globo*:

È un fenomeno senza precedenti, l'America «impazzisce» per un film italiano, «Il postino»... in poche settimane nelle sale cinematografiche di tutta America registra già incassi record da decine di milioni di dollari, ha cinque candidature ufficiali per la favolosa notte degli Oscar di questa sera [...] «Il postino» è diventato così anche un fatto culturale. Dei libri di poesia di Neruda sono state ristampate decine di migliaia di copie, mentre il romanzo di Antonio Skármeta da cui è stato tratto il film ha venduto negli Stati Uniti oltre 30 mila copie. (Randazzo, 1996: 1, 35)

But whilst Italian critics and educators rediscovered vistas of the *Bel Paese* and cherished aspects of Italian culture and way of life<sup>1</sup>, through this movie American audiences deepened their appreciation of Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Mario Franco "La vaga bellezza dell'isola che non c'è" in G. Baffi *La favola del Postino* (Lipari: Edizioni del Centro Studi, 2001) 27, and "Rassegna bibliografica" (ibid.). The film soon became a tool of educators in the teaching of Italian language and culture in spite of the often hybrid Italian diction on the part of the character of Neruda, the heavy Neapolitan accent of other characters, and the presence of the odd anacoluthon, such as Mario's striking response to his mentor's accusation of plagiarism: "la poesia non è di chi la scrive ma di chi gli serve". It has been included in course anthologies such as Antonello Borra's *Italian Through Film: A Text for Italian Courses* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), and has been used in some Australian upper secondary schools to complement teaching.

American culture, and revisited the politics of the Southern cone of their continent, inspiring a revival in popularity of Neruda's poetry. Hollywood celebrities such as Julia Roberts, Madonna, Sting, Wesley Snipes and others, enthusiastically recorded readings of Neruda's poems in English translation and in the Spanish original for the television Special "Poetry, Passion, *The Postman* — The Return of Pablo Neruda" and for distribution as audio CD.<sup>2</sup>

*Il postino*'s achievements contrast vividly with the more moderate success enjoyed previously by the novel *Ardiente paciencia* from which the film was drawn, and it would be tempting to deduce that the process of adaptation of the novel to film is in some way responsible for this change in fortune. It has been argued, in fact, that the transferring of the story from a Chilean to an Italian social context, the portraying of a much loved Mediterranean landscape and of a humble post-war Italy may have been an improvement on the original, and that Troisi's merit had been to understand the strength of the father-son relationship between the main characters that existed in Skármeta's novel.<sup>3</sup> But was Radford's radical adaptation really successful? The suggestion that the story actually gained from being transposed to a different culture and a different timeframe<sup>4</sup> is unconvincing and clearly a more appropriate critical tool is needed to determine its measure of success.

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<sup>2</sup> Now contained in the Deluxe Miramax Collector's Series Edition DVD (op. cit.).

<sup>3</sup> Luis Bacalov in "Musica da Oscar per un film dalle cinque nomination" suggests that "[l]a forza del film sta nel fatto che Neruda diventa il padre che tutti noi avremmo voluto avere... A Troisi resta il merito di avere capito la forza che c'era nel romanzo di Skármeta..." (in Baffi, 2001: 52-3).

<sup>4</sup> Radford's film is set in 1953, in the immediate Italian post-war period, against the political backdrop of the infamous "Legge truffa", whilst the original novel is set at the time of Pinochet's coup and the demise of Allende's government.

In this study I will not be concerned with the rationale for the transposition of the story from Chile to Italy as there is ample critical literature that shows that Troisi had a personal desire to make this story his own and that he was involved in the process of adaptation in a team effort (Baffi, 2001). Rather, I will examine the way Michael Radford, the film director,<sup>5</sup> dealt not only with the story line, but also with the cultural elements which formed the context background of the original and how these were transposed in the new text. A close reading of the filmic text reveals both a desire to extract and isolate one essential (poetic) component of the original narrative, and a manifest contextual chasm which the film-maker attempts to inadequately fill by providing alternative (political) contextual elements.

Critics working in the field of film adaptation of literary texts now generally agree that the issue of fidelity to the original text is a fairly futile academic exercise in criticism, since the filmic text ultimately becomes an autonomous artistic work in its own right. As Brian McFarlane suggests, “[f]idelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with” (McFarlane, 1996: 8). Perceptions of lack of fidelity, the critic further asserts, may arise from a discrepancy between two

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<sup>5</sup> The question of authorship in a movie is complex and a substantial number of critics ascribe the authorship of *Il postino* to Massimo Troisi, but there is also ample evidence to suggest that, while the initiative was taken at first by Troisi, the actual directing and most stylistic and contextual choices were Radford's. As Philippe Noiret explains, “[Troisi] aveva capito che non sarebbe riuscito a dirigerlo, e per questo motivo aveva chiesto l'aiuto di Michael Radford” (Baffi, 2001: 41). Antonio Skármeta also indicated, in an interview with Bignardi of *La Repubblica*, that Radford had chosen the ending for the film (Bignardi, 1996).

alternative legitimate readings of a base text and, since the film-maker's reading of the original is unlikely to coincide completely with that of other readers/ viewers: "the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating" (McFarlane, 1996: 9).

Whilst some critics have sought to categorise adaptations so as to place the issue of fidelity in perspective (Geoffrey Wagner, 1975: 222-226), others advocate a cultural comparative or inter-textual approach as a more appropriate method of analysis. Such is the position of Sandro Bernardi who contends that "[...] i film maggiormente riusciti sono quelli che fanno violenza al testo letterario, creando un testo diverso, un percorso narrativo ed espressivo destinato alla visione" (Bernardi, 1991: 37). Bernardi argues in favour of a contrastive cultural approach, acknowledging that "non si può mai fare a meno di constatare un'infedeltà di base, una differenza a volte divertente, altre volte irritante, altre volte ancora decisamente grottesca. Questa differenza va non solo accettata, ma studiata, ed è anzitutto su questa che si fonda la possibilità di una autentica comprensione." (Bernardi, 1991: 12).

Citing the work of André Gardles and Monique Carcaud Macaire, Jeanne-Marie Clerc takes the contrastive approach further, advocating a socio-critical approach. In the critic's view, the process of adaptation is an act of cultural creation that does not necessarily change the deep nature of the original text:

Il mezzo di comunicazione [...] genera dei significati che gli sono propri e che si aggiungono a una redistribuzione del materiale culturale incluso nel testo di partenza [...] Dunque la teoria sociocritica dell'adattamento integra i problemi di

ricezione e di ritrascrizione del libro secondo le esigenze di questa ricezione. (Clerc, 2001: VI)

Jeanne-Marie Clerc's socio-critical approach is particularly appealing in the case of *Il postino* as it avoids ineffectual 'fidelity' observations, focusing instead on the film-maker's own interpretation and re-creation:

L'«interlocutore ideale» creato dal film è colui che tenta di circoscrivere nell'opera letteraria, ricostruita dall'adattamento, l'analisi semiotica. Contemporaneamente lettore e scrittore, il regista che adatta un testo iscrive nel film la propria lettura e anche un nuovo spettatore ideale, strettamente legato alla sua cultura e al suo orizzonte d'attesa. (Clerc, 2001: VI)

The film-maker Michael Radford highlights the central element in the film:

It's about the encounter between Pablo Neruda the poet and his postman. What the story is about [...] is a man who discovers himself through poetry, love, politics [...] and everything [...] and finally becomes a whole man through poetry.<sup>6</sup>

But the original story was not merely about the encounter of a simple uneducated man with a great poet and his gathering of awareness through poetry. The original novel and film has been described as “the story of

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewed in the documentary “Poetry, Passion, *The Postman* – The Return of Pablo Neruda” (Radford & Troisi, 1994). This is also the essential message in the TV commercials and trailers released by Miramax as part of its promotion.

two love affairs linked by metaphors” (Cordaly, 1987: 22): Mario Jiménez’s love for Beatriz Gonzáles, a young waitress on Chile’s Isla Negra, parallels Pablo Neruda’s love for his country. The protagonist’s gathering of consciousness of his worth as a man and as a member of society is augmented by the gathering of political consciousness and the euphoria of social emancipation and participation in Allende’s Socialist alliance’s rise to government. This euphoria and hope for the future is brought to a tragic climax for both with the reactionary military coup, the destruction of the democratically elected Socialist government, repression, murder and the extinction of ideals.

It is evident that Radford was not at ease with the prospect of completely ignoring the political and social dimension of the story in favour of a purely poetic discourse and fictional personal relationship, as it would deprive the text of an important emotive and social element. As Radford’s character of Neruda points out to Mario in the film, poetry is not the only catalyst for love or friendship and contends that fishermen too are able to talk to girls about love: “Ma anche quei pescatori, anche loro si sono innamorati, no? Sono riusciti a dire qualche cosa alle ragazze che gli piacevano, a farle innamorare, a farsi sposare...”

Radford’s decision not to excise the political dimension endows the text with added significance. As Peter Murphy correctly points out in his study “Friendship’s Eu-topia”:

Communist eu-topia<sup>7</sup> provides the third party that makes a  
friendship — at least a genuine friendship — possible

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Murphy in his article intended to use the term in a philosophical sense, arguing that “[j]ust as philosophy is the activity of friends, so also is politics”. With reference to *Il postino*, the critic

between these two. The poet's eu-topia is one in which the world, as a place of suffering, becomes the place of art. The mimesis of art endows the prosaic, lacerating Nature of Mario's impoverished island with an exhilarating, incandescent beauty, and the postman hears something of the sounds of this eu-topia in the beauty of the poet's words. Once the postman becomes converted to the cause of Communism, he and the poet can know each other as friends. (Murphy, 1998: 174)

Not to provide a suitable historical and political backdrop could also have meant directing a flawed story: but how could the film-maker justify Neruda's presence in Italy and his influence on Mario? Radford felt that "filmmaking is about detail, it's about getting the details right and from these details you actually can expand and create great theme."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the film director chose to retain Skármeta's coherent interconnection of fiction and historical truth by locating events at a time when Neruda actually resided on the island of Capri, near Naples, from February 1952 until the Chilean government lifted an order against him on 12 August of that same year. Radford's attention to historical details, such as the popular "battle of the flowers" which impeded Neruda's expulsion decreed by De Gasperi, is fitting, and the filmmaker sought in Neruda's

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suggests that the "eu-topia of politics is a projection of friendship into the wider space of public life". See "Friendship's Eu-topia", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (97:1, Winter 1998) 170.

<sup>8</sup> "Audio Commentary" by Michael Radford contained in the Bonus Material in the Miramax Collector's Series Edition DVD.

own works the needed reinforcing biographical and historical elements, and alternative verses to interpolate in the film script.<sup>9</sup>

But the link between Mario's mentor and the Italian political context is vague and superficial, and the film-maker finds the need to rely for political depth on the character of Giorgio, the island's postmaster and Mario's superior. A convinced Communist, Giorgio is also an outsider from Milan, but is conversant with the ideology and discourse of Italian politics. It is Giorgio who fills in the information gaps and who insists on the poet's social commitment, whilst the character of Neruda is only able to provide general and universal statements and testimony of human suffering. The film-maker connects Neruda's Socialist consciousness to Skármeta's mention of Dante Alighieri and the name of Beatrice, redirecting these intertextual suggestions towards a vision of human exploitation and misery in the *Inferno*, with a loose transcription from the chapter "La pampa salitrera" (Gordils, 2001) of Neruda's *Confieso que he vivido*:

Un giorno, un uomo uscito da una miniera di carbone a Lota, era una maschera di sabbia e di sudore, il viso stravolto da una fatica terribile, gli occhi arrossati dalla polvere. Mi tese la mano callosa e mi disse: "Dovunque vas [sic] parla di questi tormenti. Parla del tuo fratello che vive là sotto nell'inferno". Ho sentito allora che dovevo scrivere qualcosa che accompagnasse le lotte degli uomini e forse la poesia dei maltrattati.

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<sup>9</sup> See Yanis Gordils "El mundo como metáfora" in *La Torre* (año VI, núm. 20-21, abril-septiembre 2001) 331-379. Gordils admirably traces many sources of interpolated poetry, events and names, including that of the protagonist Mario whose surname was most likely Alicatta.

But the political discourse would sound hollow indeed if the story did not have a credible socio-historical context with which to justify the protagonist's acquisition of socio-political awareness; the film-maker's decision to link the storyline to the events surrounding the infamous "Legge truffa"<sup>10</sup> was possibly the only choice chronologically plausible, but it was artistically disappointing. It seems rather unfulfilling to have the hero die in a crowd scuffle against the backdrop of social activism leading to the 1953 elections that actually saw the demise of the Christian Democratic leader De Gasperi and a strengthening of the left. As historians point out, the DC suffered a 13% decrease in popular support compared to the previous elections: "[I]a sconfitta è cocente, la "legge truffa" non è servita a nulla. Non solo, ma si aggiunge la beffa. Per soli 57.000 voti non scatta il premio di maggioranza."<sup>11</sup> Radford does not elaborate on the incongruity of his protagonist's poignant death in a confrontation where his comrades eventually score a modest victory. But the film-maker is keenly aware of the inadequacy of his treatment of the political context, its linking with a purported problem of water supply to the island and a shady local political figure:

This is part of a sub-plot which got much, much reduced. I don't even know if it's intelligible now. This (Di Cosimo) is

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<sup>10</sup> The "Legge truffa" was an attempt by the Christian Democratic Party to gain a controlling majority of seats by introducing an electoral system which would reward the political party gaining 50% + 1 of votes. The centre coalition (DC, PRI, PSLI, PSD) lost ground at the 1953 elections with 49.8% of votes and the new "Legge truffa" did not come into effect by a mere 57,000 votes.

<sup>11</sup> "Era ormai chiaro a De Gasperi che la "legge truffa" non solo non aveva fatto guadagnare voti al centro ma aveva, rispetto al 1948, fatto perdere il 13%. Era una vera Caporetto. Un'altra tornata alle elezioni, nella migliore ipotesi e pur senza una temuta guerra civile, avrebbe peggiorato sicuramente una situazione già molto critica [...] Guadagnavano sorprendentemente le sinistre con PCI e PSF" *Corriere del 2000 - Cronologia* online resource at: <http://www.cronologia.it/storia/a1953.htm> . Accessed on 16 June 2005.

the one character I think I'm the least satisfied with. This guy... comes across almost as a cliché of the Mafioso politico of Southern Italy [...] we have to deal with the sub-plot... which was never terribly satisfactory and we cut it down as much as we possibly could. It was a long and complicated sub-plot about these workers and the pipes and God-knows-what... and we cut it down and down and down in the cutting room...<sup>12</sup>

Radford's audio commentary which accompanies the DVD edition of the film shows clearly that he felt quite ill-at-ease with the socio-political context he had created, though he deemed political events significant enough to affect the lives of the protagonists. Commenting on the impact that events had on the character of Neruda at the end of the film, he observes: "a man, a great man, dwarfed by the events which have taken place and of which he was completely ignorant, and yet which he was so perfectly capable to express [in his poetry]" (ibid).

The film-maker is much more enthusiastic about the incorporation of the recurring image of a little white table soccer ball to which he attaches considerable importance, deeming it a "crucial theme" in the movie:

Now that ball became in our screenplay and in the way Massimo dealt with it absolutely crucial, absolutely crucial. And we built it in as we were shooting into a great theme

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<sup>12</sup> In the "Audio Commentary" (op. cit.), Radford is quite frank about aspects of the film he considers flawed, including inconsistent coastline shots, background objects, props, and camera takes. The audio commentary is a great tool that allows valuable insights into the work of an outstanding film director.

through the movie and ending with the ball bouncing towards his son when he is no longer with us. (ibid.)

In fact, it is difficult to appreciate why such a recurrent image should be considered “crucial” in the movie, given that the image suggests desire at the beginning, and yet rolls at the feet of a five year old boy at the end of the movie.

What the film-maker misses and is unable to reproduce in his adapted screenplay is the extremely close connection between the sexual, the poetic and political metaphors which existed in the original text and his re-created images and metaphors, therefore, remain detached and isolated, even superfluous.

The novelist Antonio Skármeta used sexual and poetic imagery in *Ardiente paciencia*<sup>13</sup> to create a subtext which conveyed allegorically his view of the situation in Chile at the time of Allende. Reiterated references to “metaforones” in the preface to his novel, the name Beatriz (Beatrice) and references to Dante Alighieri alert readers to the possibility of an allegorical interpretation and a parallel between Mario’s love affair with the young girl, and Neruda’s love for Chile; a connection which transcends the narrative plane of reality. Neruda’s “allegorical” function was in fact formally conceived by Skármeta ten years before the publication of his novel, as the author explained in an interview with Jorge Lafforgue in 1974:

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<sup>13</sup> Antonio Skármeta, *Ardiente paciencia* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Ediciones del Norte, 1985). Quotations in brackets are given from this edition. All translations are mine.

En cuanto a las *Memorias* de Neruda, pienso que hay una equivalencia muy firme entre el espíritu de lo que fue la Unidad Popular y ese libro, incluso entre lo que ha sido la historia de Chile en los últimos cincuenta años y esa vida [...] permite trazar una correspondencia entre el final de la vida de este hombre y algo que en Chile muere de manera tan brutal [...] Lo que más me asombra y me parece notable es esa especie de nupcias entre pueblo y poeta. (Lafforgue, 1974: 25)

(With respect to Neruda's *Memorias*, I think there is a very strong equivalence between the spirit of what once was Unidad Popular and this book, including between what has been Chile's history in the last fifty years and (Neruda's) life [...] it makes it possible to trace a correspondence between the end of the life of that man and something that died in Chile in such a brutal manner [...] What impresses me and seems noteworthy is a kind of marriage between the people and the poet.)

The most significant sexual and poetic images in the book relate to the human tongue and to oral sex. These images dominate the story's metaphoric discourse. Words are the principal tools of communication and seduction in the novel: Mario seeks Neruda's help and poetic verses not merely to communicate with the object of his desire, but to seduce and to possess her. Mario Jiménez, like Mario Ruoppolo in *Il postino*, becomes infatuated with Beatriz (Beatrice) when she teases and tempts him by placing a *taca tacá* (table-soccer) ball in her mouth. Mario plagiarises Neruda's verses to try and seduce Beatriz and subdue her resistance, while Doña Rosa (donna Rosa) accuses the humble postman of creating intense desire in Beatriz by means of poetic verses and words: "tiene a mi hija más caliente que una termita" (he's got my daughter hotter than a termite) (53). When Mario is unable to see the girl, he paces

in front of her tavern with metaphors “atragantadas en la garganta” (stuck in his throat), dreaming of being able to lift her skirt with his tongue (45). The sexual power attributed to poetry is clear in the reference to Mario’s attempt to hide his erections with Neruda’s poetry books, as he imagines that “cada metáfora acuñada, cada suspiro, cada anticipo de ella en sus lóbulos, entre sus piernas, era una fuerza cósmica que nutría su esperma” (each pointy metaphor, each sigh, each anticipation of her in his buds, between his legs, was a cosmic force which nourished his sperm) (45-46). But poetry recited by Neruda at political rallies appeared to have a similar erotic effect on people, especially women. Neruda in the narrative text recalls that:

centenares de hombres y mujeres del pueblo [...] me estrujaban, besaban y lloraban. A todos ellos les hablaba o les leía mis poemas. Cada vez asistía más gente a mis concentraciones. Cada vez acudían más mujeres. (46)  
(hundreds of men and women of the town [...] rubbed against me, kissed me and cried. I spoke to all of them and read my poems to them. More and more people came to my meetings. More and more women came.)

Neruda in the novel is not the detached literate or observer: he is an active participant in socio-political events of his country, moving among the people, speaking fervently at rallies and campaigning for democratic change. It is not difficult to conceive a parallel linking seduction, sexual activity and political wooing. Mario’s heightened love-making coincides markedly with important phases of political achievement on the part of Allende’s Unidad Popular and Beatriz’s own orgasms are boisterous on important political occasions and her sexuality is contagious to others in the vicinity.

It is quite possible that the writer intended to give his heroine, Beatriz González, the role of representing allegorically his beloved country Chile, the object of desire of all and coveted by all sides of politics. Possibly the scene most revealing of this function is the one in which Mario and Beatriz make love for the first time, at a time that coincides with the radio announcement that Allende's coalition *Unidad Popular* had democratically won the elections.

During most of the scene in the novel the two lovers engage in erotic foreplay:

la muchacha alzó el oval y frágil huevo, y tras cerrar con el pie la puerta, lo puso cerca de sus labios. Bajándolo un poco hacia sus senos lo deslizó siguiendo el palpitante bulto con los dedos danzarines, lo resbaló sobre su terso estómago, lo trajo hasta el vientre, lo escurrió sobre su sexo, lo ocultó en medio del triángulo de sus piernas entibiándolo instantáneamente, y entonces clavó una mirada caliente en los ojos de Mario. (60-1)

(the girl lifted up the oval shaped, fragile egg, and after closing the door with her foot, placed it close to her lips. Lowering it a little towards her breasts, she made it glide along her palpitating bosom with her dancing fingers, she slid it on her terse stomach, brought it down to her belly, she slid it on her sex, hid it in the triangle of her legs warming it instantly, and then she fixed her gaze in Mario's eyes.)

What happens next marks the difference between the intentions of the original narrative text and the one recreated in the screenplay of *Il postino*: Beatriz entices Mario caressing an egg (rather than the familiar white table-soccer ball); the familiar sexual motif has become a symbol of

fertility, of new life and of a new beginning, but it is a fragile object that needs to be handled with care, just like the newly acquired political democracy of Chile.

As Mario continues the erotic foreplay with the egg provided by Beatriz, caressing and fondling the girl's body with his lips and tongue, he abandons himself to a frenzy of passion: "Este momento, se dijo, este, este momento, este este este este este momento, este este, este momento este ... en su mente una explosión de peces destellantes brotaban en un océano calmo" (This is the moment, he said to himself, this this this this this moment, this this this moment this one ... in his head an explosion of glittering fish burst out into a calm ocean) (62). Mario loses control, the egg falls and is broken, and the girl reaches her climax prematurely:

En ese preciso instante Beatriz emitió un grito [...] Se dejó resbalar hasta la madera del piso [...] le dijo con voz ronca: - Me hiciste acabar, tonto. (63)  
(At that precise moment Beatriz gave out a cry [...] She let herself slide down to the wooden floor [...] She told him in a throaty voice: "You made me come, silly!")

Beatriz's cry does not only express her frustration at having reached a climax too soon, but also a disapproval of Mario's poor sense of timing and lack of control. The sexual metaphor veils Skármeta's indictment of the errors committed by the Allende government. Allende's Socialist alliance Unidad Popular wooed the country with rhetoric (figuratively, the protagonists' seductive speech and tongue), but did not provide timely and pragmatic responses to the many problems facing the Chile, or address reactionary dissent in the country. Proud and confident in its status as a legitimate and democratically elected government, it tried to carry out changes too quickly, destroying prospects of longer term social progress

(this is symbolised by the image of the egg: “el huevo, cual si estuviera a punto de empollar” [the egg about to hatch] 61), and offered words instead of real solutions to the many problems of the day. In the story, Mario is described by the narrator as “partidario de un socialismo utópico” [supporters of a utopian socialism] (91), while the politicians in the Socialist alliance are described as “mejores poetas que gobernantes [better at poetry than at governing the nation]” (93).

It is clear that Skármeta’s characters are representative of the people who promoted the democratic process in Chile at the time of Allende, as the author has affirmed in an interview with Gras Balaguer: “En Chile, arte y política estaban entramados: Neruda fue en este sentido ejemplar [...] El proceso de la Unidad Popular desencadenó una potencialidad creativa latente y la exageró” [In Chile, art and politics were interconnected: Neruda was in this sense typical (...) The political process of Unidad Popular unleashed a latent creative potential and exaggerated it] (Gras Balaguer, 1986: 14).

The character of Neruda is in particular representative of such typically utopian politics:

Vi en Neruda como el símbolo de un modo de hacer política en mi país que yo diría que confunde casi la política con la poesía. Nosotros enfrentamos enormes tareas políticas muy rigurosas y lo hicimos con armas extremadamente ingenuas. De pronto había complotos y paros, dificultades graves de todo orden [...] cada vez que sucedía esto, se hacía una manifestación pública donde cantaban conjuntos [...] Todo esto se nos reveló después del golpe como ingenuo, utópico. (Woodyard, 1984)

(I saw in Neruda the symbol of a way of doing politics in my country that I would say confuses politics with poetry. We confronted enormous and critical political tasks and did so with extremely naïve tools. Suddenly there were strikes and plots, grave difficulties of all kinds [...] and every time this occurred, we made public demonstrations where bands played [...] After the coup, all of this seemed naïve and utopian.)

As a writer, intellectual and former professor of literature at the University of Chile who had been very much involved in the socio-political process of the time, Antonio Skármeta wrote his novel in exile at a time when he was able to reconsider and reassess both positive and negative aspects of this unique experience:

Yo tuve un gran amor por la Unidad Popular chilena y un gran respeto por el presidente Allende. Pero solamente desde lejos recuerdo algunas escenas pavorosas de las cuales yo también fui participe. Recuerdo que había un tiempo en que la Unidad Popular—por cualesquiera que fuesen los motivos—no había arreglado los problemas de la carestía en Chile [...] hacíamos marchas por las calles [...] pasábamos gritando consignas favorables a Allende. (Rosa Zapata, 1987: 87-88)

(I felt great love for the Chilean Unidad Popular and great respect for President Allende. But only at a distance I remember some fearful scenes in which I also participated. I remember the time when Unidad Popular, for whatever reasons, did not fix Chile's problems of shortages [...] we marched in the streets [...] we shouted slogans in support of Allende.)

The link between sexual and political images is of course not exclusive to Skármeta's writing, and it is, as critic Donald Shaw argued convincingly, a familiar feature in Post-Boom Spanish American fiction.<sup>14</sup> What is unique in *Ardiente paciencia* is the close connection established between major images and the storyline: a connection that makes a polysemic reading of the novel possible. *Ardiente paciencia* is at the same time a story about love, about poetry, about the power of the word and its misuse, about socio-political events in a particularly traumatic period in Chile's history, and about the life and work of a great literary figure.

Such polysemic reading is not possible in Radford's film. The socio-historical and political backdrop remains very much in the background with only unconvincing connections to the protagonists' lives, and Neruda is very much a detached transient observer moved more by the natural landscape than by the Italian human environment. Poetic metaphors do connect with Mario's need for friendship and love, but Italian viewers will be more impressed by Troisi's warm Neapolitan pronunciation than by translated verses which appear quite alien on his "volto emaciato e tirato, dolce e pieno di entusiasmo di comunicare, ma che non riesce a nascondere la stanchezza e la sofferenza" (Castellano, 2001: 14). The white little table-soccer ball in the film never grows as a symbol charged with pregnant significance. It does not become an emblem of new life and new beginning as in the novel, but remains a nostalgic reminder that it once touched the lips of Beatrice and, through this vision, the

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<sup>14</sup> Shaw's analysis of Spanish American fiction drew him to the conclusion that sexuality "figured primarily in two contexts. On the one hand [...] sexual activity could offer a means of [...] escape from personal solitude and even existential insecurity [...] One the other hand, sexual behaviour was closely connected to the political process". See Donald L. Shaw, "Love and Sex in Skármeta's *Match Ball*", in *Love Sex and Eroticism in Contemporary Latin American Literature* Alun Kenwood ed. (Melbourne/Madrid: Voz Hispánica, 1992) 23.

consciousness of Mario; it never really acquires a connotation of sexuality or of desire, and is to be considered a superfluous element in the adaptation, though it may persist as an image of poetic inspiration handed down to Pablito five years after Mario's death.

Giulio Baffi, critic and artistic director of the "Premio Massimo Troisi", a prize set up to honour the memory of this film's principal actor, suggested: "[u]n film lo si può amare anche riconoscendone le imperfezioni. O proprio per quelle, se si riesce a vedere oltre quei segni il segno più profondo di un progetto eroico e poetico" (Baffi, 2001: 12). Even from the perspective of film adaptation we should emphatically agree with Baffi's affirmation. We also agree with Fabio Ferzetti when he suggests there are three valid reasons for seeing *Il postino*: "Troisi, Troisi e ancora Troisi" (Ferzetti, 1994), but we should also recognize the excellence of Radford's direction and editing, the skilful camera work and lighting by Franco Di Giacomo, the inspired sound track and brilliant acting of the cast.

Speaking with Irene Bignardi, Antonio Skármeta expressed similar mixed appreciation of the film:

L'ho amato [il film] dal primo momento senza riserve [...] salvo una [...] Vede, nel romanzo ci muoviamo in un mondo di piccole relazioni personali e private, dove esplode la poesia, l'amicizia e l'amore. Si suggerisce che questo abbia a che fare con qualcosa di più grande, con l'idea che il Cile è il punto di partenza[...] e alla fine del romanzo si sa che il sogno è stato infranto [...] Adattando il libro alla realtà italiana degli anni Cinquanta, Troisi e i suoi amici non avevano questo stesso sfondo. Si sono concentrati sulla solitudine di qualcuno che deve andare avanti senza il suo

maestro e che fa dell'attività politica ispirata dal poeta. Una situazione molto emotiva, ma a cui manca il tocco epico. (Bignardi, 1996)

In hindsight, if we wish to judge the film from the socio-critical perspective proposed by Jeanne-Marie Clerc, which views the process of adaptation as an act of cultural creation that is in some sense still true to the “deep nature” of the original work, we would need to conclude that the film-maker tried, but failed to retain and bring together the different elements that gave the original novel its cultural and artistic wholeness. *Il postino* may indeed be regarded as a very appealing film, but one that is engaging in spite of its imperfect adaptation.

(Monash University)

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