

## **Aesthetics Engage Language** *by Sally Ades*

Although the medium of film, by virtue of its photographic process, is image-dominated, some of its finest efforts have been in re-presenting word-centric tales. The text—appealing to the intellect—is refashioned/reinvented into a medium appealing to the senses of sight and hearing, through the personal vision of an autuer/director who adapts material from the language of text to the language of film. Certainly technical considerations come into play, but the autuer’s choices are essentially aesthetic. In rendering words into images, he or she responds to the audiovisual aesthetic of film.

Since its inception, cinema has re-created countless literary works into a new reality by the perspective of this lens-driven medium. The new creation, now expressed in the language of film, may resemble its source but it is distinct. This tenuous relationship between word and image is articulated by Michel Foucault in his landmark study of European madhouses, *Madness and Civilization*.

Between word and image, between what is depicted by language and what is uttered by plastic form, the unity begins to dissolve; a single and identical meaning is not immediately common to them. And if it is true that the image still has the function of speaking of transmitting something consubstantial with language, we must recognize that it already no longer says the same thing; and that by its own plastic values painting (animation) engages in an experiment that will take it farther and farther from language, whatever the superficial identity of the theme (18).

Foucault identifies an essential issue in the relationship of text and image. That film, even as it engages the text by translating it into images, by virtue of “its own plastic values,” alters the meaning to conform to a different code or language. It

follows that the filmmaker adapting text into the medium of film makes the choices that inevitably create a new product.

But what if the “superficial identity of the theme” is language itself? How does film explore, translate the nature of words—“what is depicted by language” into “what is uttered by plastic form”? Two films that respond to the interrogation or dialogue between image and text by cinematically re-presenting the nature of language are *Il postino* and *Padre padrone*.

These films are based on books that focus on the power of language to transform and re-form both initiates and masters in the world of language. Each film is unique in its approach to this theme, reflecting the personal vision or subjective reality of its respective author, yet they share a similar structure in their means of translating the nature of language into the imagery of film. The films are structured linearly to follow the protagonists as they move through various stages in their encounter with language: they have an awakening, or epiphany, to a world of language they never knew existed; they desire to learn about this new world; and finally, they are transformed by literacy as are those around them.

*Padre padrone* is an Italian production by the directorial team of Vittorio and Paolo Taviani who adapted an autobiography by Gavino Ledda, an illiterate shepherd in Sardinia who becomes a professor of linguistics and best-selling author. *Il postino* is also about a man whose life is altered by words. As postman to the Chilean Marxist poet, Pablo Neruda, recently exiled for his political affiliation, Mario is influenced by the poet to see and feel through poetry. Essentially an Italian film, its British director, Michael Radford, adapted a Chilean novel by Antonio Skármeta.

The directors of these two films respond to the language-based concepts of the books through their own vision. Vittorio Taviani describes this challenge, as quoted by Millicent Marcus in her study of Italian cinema and its relation to literary adaptation, *Filmmaking by the Book*, “it was necessary to decompose the book into its constituent material . . . and make the material that came from the experience of Gavino Ledda, man and author of the book, confront our own material, and it was necessary to recompose all in a different work that has its own language, audio-visual language” (157). The director evaluates the process from text to image that he and his brother followed in adapting *Padre*. Vittorio’s words about recomposing the book into a “different work,” echo Foucault’s.

In *Il postino*, Radford introduces the theme of language in the first scene. Mario Ruloppolo, the protagonist, haltingly attempts to express his revulsion at fishing to his unsympathetic fisherman father. Their conversation is an edgy, inarticulate dialogue, because of Mario’s frustration in trying to communicate why he can’t follow

his father as a fisherman, and his father's silent response. Thus, Radford begins his film with a scene that is all about words—Mario and his father lack the words to express their feelings and the film shows this by silence, their facial expressions, and body language. This scene sets up the viewer for the role words will play for Mario, enabling him to articulate his ideas and feelings through poetry.

The films exploit the audio-visual aesthetic of their medium to portray how the introduction of words to these young men, Mario and Gavino, is preceded by other means of communication such as music and nature. Mario awakens to the lyrical nature of poetry when he happens upon the Neruda's, dancing a passionate tango to music from their gramophone. In this scene, Radford places the viewer alongside Mario as he watches, charmed by the grace and intensity of their movements. Mario and the viewer are being primed to *see* poetry as an audio-visual language. Later when he reads Neruda's poetry and questions him on its meaning, the poet gives him his first lesson, "when you explain poetry it becomes banal. You must feel it. Meaning doesn't count, images are spontaneous." Neruda and his wife express poetry in emotion, tenderness and passion as they dance. This kind of poetry needs no explanation to the voyeur, Mario. He intuitively understands this language, and soon will intuit the written language of poetry.

In *Padre*, Gavino also intuitively understands the language of feelings. But his entrance into the language of words is through an intimate knowledge of nature and its sensory codes, which he learns as a child-shepherd—left to express himself through feelings, but without words.

In teaching him how to survive in the savage loneliness of the Sardinian region of Baddevrustana, his father, Efsio, asks him, "Do you hear this rustling? You need to learn to recognize it. Lower your eyes." Marcus describes this scene where "the man and the boy both close their eyes and tilt their heads down in concentration," as a "mythopoetic vision" for Gavino. And she links this scene to Gavino's eventual entrance into literacy, because it is his acute sensory perception that causes him to respond to music. "It is sound," she writes, "that liberates Gavino from the solipsism and muteness of his shepherd's lot, as the music of Strauss's *Fledermaus* rescues him from the stultification of Baddevrustana, and as language finally equips him to communicate with others and think critically about his plight" (169). Thus, when some itinerant musicians happen to pass him on their way to the nearest village and he hears music for the first time he is fascinated and attracted to the world of culture that it opens to him.

In his autobiography, Gavino describes his love for the *sound* of words, which led him to become a linguist. But through the aesthetic medium of film the viewer

*hears* the sounds that sensitized and prepared him for words. As Marcus explains, “sound becomes Gavino’s true educator” (170). The film’s soundtrack assails the viewer with a barrage of deeply evocative sounds, including wailing sheep, tolling bells, and the chilling cries of the shepherds as they shriek over the mountains to each other. These familiar sounds of his shepherd’s life represent Gavino’s earliest awareness of communication. Next, are the cultural sounds of music as he evolves toward words.

According to the Taviani’s audio aesthetic, Gavino enters the world of language through the door of sound. Whether the real-life Gavino was as influenced by sensory perception as is his re-presented film-self, is immaterial to the film which has become a unique work with its own language. What *is* pertinent, is the means to express his intellectual transition from illiteracy to literacy—largely a mental journey—as an audio-visual journey on film.

In this film journey, Gavino and Mario move from their awakening to language into their desire to learn. But their desire to learn is motivated by more pressing desires. Mario is smitten by the island siren, Beatrice, who snubs his clumsy advances toward her. Undeterred, he enlists his new friend, Neruda, to help him win her through poetry. For Mario, Neruda serves as a surrogate father, teaching and guiding him to see the world through words and convey his vision to others through poetry. Gavino, on the other hand, sees the world of learning as a way to escape from the suffocating oppression of his authoritarian father-*padrone*. Indeed, it is Efigenio who precipitates his learning experience by enslaving him in illiteracy.

A compelling scene in *Padre*, illustrates Gavino’s first steps toward independence. Gavino and other young shepherds are carrying their local saint to a village. The Tavianis drive home the role of the father/*padrone* by a cinematic *coup de maitre*: the face of the saint becomes the face of Gavino’s father, looming over the boys who are struggling to bear his weight on their shoulders. It is cinematography that needs no words to make its point. It is infused with symbolism referencing the collusion of patriarchal and religious authority—elements which conspire to maintain the status quo in the rural Sardinian society.

It is in this scene that Gavino first verbalizes his need to escape his father’s control—“rejecting his father” as Peter Bondanella succinctly sums it up in his *Italian Cinema From Neorealism to the Present*, “and the archaic, patriarchal system of repressive authority he represents” (344). And it’s in this scene where Gavino joins the other youths in their decision to emigrate to Germany, as a means “to slough off the weight of patriarchal culture figured by the patron saint and enter into a history of (at least attempted) self-determination” (Marcus 174). Although this first attempt

to get out of his father's grasp fails because Efisio denies him permission to leave Sardinia, Gavino has taken the first step toward throwing off the shackles of illiteracy his father has imposed on him.

Mario also takes bold steps to reinvent himself. From an inarticulate, barely educated—albeit clever fellow, he aspires to express himself by writing poetry. On the face of it, this appears a quantum leap—but like Gavino, he is deeply motivated. He must overcome his own diffidence, Beatrice's indifference, and placate her watchdog aunt's superstitions and suspicions. He observes Neruda's marital felicity and the esteem in which he is held by the world at large, and naturally concludes that poetry achieved this for the poet.

For his initial attempt to create poetry, Mario learns about metaphors from Neruda. Radford plays with the term metaphor, applying it visually to film as it applies in poetry—to invoke an image for the viewer that gives a new perspective on the subject. For instance, Mario creating metaphors from the beauty of his island is a metaphor itself for his new, poetic view of his surroundings. Neruda's advice that “when you explain poetry it becomes banal,” points to film as the ultimate metaphor for a novel way to look at text—through images.

Creating metaphors involves locating a kinship between concepts, which aptly describes the author's task. This task may be understood from the perspective of translation theory as posited by Walter Benjamin in his essay, “The Task of the Translator,” where he discusses the link between languages. “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect (*Intention*) [his emphasis] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (Venuti 18). From this perspective, Radford's emphasis on the metaphor in *Il postino* may be seen as providing that link or echo to the original, the book by Skármeta.

Mario creates metaphors for Beatrice, smuggling them to her in secret letters to avoid her aunt's prying eyes. As she repeats Mario's words to herself, savoring their sensual and romantic quality, they transform him, in her eyes, into a person of stature—a poet like Neruda. We hear her thoughts in the film by the cinematic technique of voice-overs, enabling the viewer to eavesdrop on the characters' thoughts.

But her aunt sees these metaphors differently. In her ignorance she suspects the metaphors, indeed any words that she doesn't know, to be a secret code between her niece and Mario. Here, the film illustrates the value of words from different perspectives. The aunt and her ally the priest are satirized as comical, superstitious characters serving as counterpoints to Neruda and Mario, also accomplices but mo-

tivated to open rather than close minds. In this context, the film also juxtaposes learning, as represented by words, with ignorance or fear of words. Beatrice defends Mario's verse by telling her aunt that there is nothing wrong with words—but the aunt treats Mario's sequestered letter to Beatrice as if it were a message from the devil.

As Mario rambles around his island in search of metaphors, the cinematography focuses on the lush, fertile ambiance of his surroundings which inspire him. The island is his muse. He need go no farther to gather images for his poetry. By contrast, the landscape of Gavino's world is barren, harsh, isolated. The Tavianis give a view of the interior Sardinian countryside, in particular the pastoral area of Baddevrustana—site of Gavino's calvary experience as a shepherd—that clearly reflects his barren intellect during his exile in this inhospitable terrain.

Using landscape as imagery in these films insinuates the direction of each protagonist's journey toward eloquence and personal enlightenment. Mario's evolution moves from the particular to the general; that is to say, he learns language from his mentor, Neruda, and from the resources of his island. From there he moves outward, as he becomes aware of politics and the state of affairs of his country. His thinking processes also evolve from the personal to the universal as he moves from his romantic concerns to embrace the beliefs of brotherhood espoused by Communism and embedded in Neruda's poetry. His personal goals expand accordingly, from winning Beatrice to contributing to his fellow workers' struggle for justice and equality. From the peaceful, remote atmosphere of his island, he journeys out to the turbulent political arena on the mainland of Italy.

Gavino's journey works in reverse. Due to the harshness of his native environment—both physical and mental—he is forced to emigrate to the mainland in search of education and enrichment. His experiences outside of Sardinia give him the tools to view his own environment with perspective. Like Mario, his path leads from the particular to the universal when he returns to his homeland to apply his education to help others who are still in bondage to illiteracy and an archaic, repressive culture.

Gavino's return to Sardinia at the end of the film diverges from the actual ending in his autobiography where he does not return home. There are, no doubt, various reasons why the Tavianis chose to change Gavino's ending. One reason may be to give a framing device to the film, which gives shape/support to a concept. In the film version, the real-life Gavino opens and closes the film by appearing as himself in the beginning and end. This particular frame invokes the film's source, an autobiography, to remind us it is a true story. And at the same time, the frame calls atten-

tion to the film's distance from the book by creating a different ending. These opposing messages self-reflectively point to the new creation that has emerged from the auteurs' vision.

Another construct of the filmmakers, which serves to turn a concept into an arresting visual image, is to repeat the classroom scene, which opens the film, again at the end of the film. One of the first scenes of the film shows Efigenio barging into his son's classroom to end his education by taking him out of school to become a shepherd. His audacious action in the class epitomizes the authoritarian patriarchal role that is the basic conflict of the story. He roars to the class of frightened little boys in knee pants, "Hands on the desk: today it's Gavino's turn, tomorrow it's yours!" To drive home the point that Gavino eventually succeeds in thwarting his father's plans to keep him in ignorance, the auteurs repeat this scene toward the end of the film, with a twist.

The first time we see the scene, the camera pans four of the boys as they reflect on Gavino's plight. We hear their thoughts in voice-overs—their childlike reactions in rebellion to his fate—and see their tear-stained faces. But at the end of the film when the scene is repeated and the same four children are again singled out by the camera, instead of words we hear the Strauss waltz which began Gavino's journey out of his shepherd existence. The implication is clear, as Bondanella interprets it, "but now his terrifying words have an entirely new and revolutionary significance, one of hope rather than despair, for if Gavino was able to evolve from an illiterate peasant into a professor of linguistics and even a best-selling author, than all of the school children have the same potential" (344). However, the Tavianis, being true to their personal vision of this story, don't leave us with a utopian version.

From this upbeat revision of the classroom scene, the final scenes show the real-life Gavino back in his shepherd persona, but as an adult. He is perched on the same rocks of Baddevrustana rocking back and forth as he had when as a child he tried to console himself from his fear and isolation. This ending, and the classroom scene, visually summarizes his ultimate transformation and its effect on others, for the purposes of the film version. On the one hand, Gavino's success has given hope to children who may follow his example and strike out for education against the imprisoning structure of their culture. On the other hand, the image of a grown man reverting to his childhood method of self-consolation throws doubt on his victory over the past as being a complete victory. The Tavianis' ending is a two-edged sword, which may be the visual representation of an unanswered question: how to measure success in personal and universal terms.

This question is also handled with ambiguity in *Il postino*. The auteur depicts the personal and the universal in the trajectory of Mario's and Neruda's lives. The poet's fortunes, like Mario's are tied to the world of learning and poetry. Neruda is a world-famous poet, revered by many, as shown by the letters he receives, yet he is exiled from his country because of his poetry. He inspires others to fight for freedom with his verse, yet he grieves for his homeland on an isolated island—crying at a tape sent by his friends in Chile. Ultimately he gains recognition and awards, at home and abroad. But when he returns after years to visit his former place of exile, he learns of Mario's death and hears the tape he made for him. We may conclude from his pensive expression as he listens to Mario's audio-poetry on tape, that he is weighing his own life against the tragedy and success of Mario's.

Mario's life is also remade by his response to the language of poetry. His metaphors and verses empower him to attract the woman he loves and enable him to articulate ideas—ideas learned from Neruda's poetry. He grasps the abstract or spiritual aspect of poetry and creates an audio-poem for Neruda by taping the sounds of his island—the waves, the wind, birds—and the heartbeat of his unborn son. He also writes a poem in homage to his mentor, Neruda, but before he can read it at a political rally, he is killed.

In these final scenes, the auteur summarizes the film without providing or imposing a judgment or conclusion. Like *Padre*, the ending is open to interpretation. The viewer, like Neruda, is invited to weigh the success of Mario's transformation from simpleton to a literary thinker who learns to translate his ideas into poetic terms, surpassing his mentor by creating a unique work of art—a wordless poem of sounds.

What did Mario or Gavino accomplish by learning to love words, to express their thoughts through verse or prose? What is the cost of being re-born by language? How do we measure the impact of poetry, literature on ourselves, on our world? The ambiguous endings of *Il postino* and *Padre padrone* pose these questions and invite the viewer to reflect on how the films explored these issues, and how the visual representation translated these ideas to images.

These films constantly remind the viewer that they are watching the interaction between words and image—by spotlighting letters, poetry, references to literature, words in voice-overs and superimposed on the screen, just to name a few of the devices used by the filmmakers to forge a link between text and image. Recalling Foucault's words that “between word and image . . . a single and identical meaning is not immediately common to them,” we may ask, what is the link that makes these dissimilar mediums able to communicate or find a common ground in film?

The link may be in finding the *intention*, as Benjamin identifies it, in the original and re-presenting it in the translated product. He gives us a poetic image to understand this concept, “unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (Venuti 20).

*Il postino* and *Padre padrone* explore this *intention* in the source material and restate it in the aesthetic of their medium. This process is inferred by Neruda’s words to Mario: “When you explain poetry it becomes banal. You must feel it. Meaning doesn’t count, images are spontaneous.” The meaning is not the same, but the images suggest the echo of the original. Film is a language of images, which must be perceived by the senses. It is our spontaneous reaction to these images that attract us to film—an aesthetic reaction to an aesthetic medium.

### Works Cited

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