

“Swept Away By An Unusual Destiny In The Blue Sea Of August”
Lina Wertmüller, 1974 - Guy Ritchie's Swept Away 2001.

In a Steven Daly interview in “Vanity Fair,” Guy Ritchie and Madonna clearly state they do not intend to reproduce the heavy violence, sex, class and political conflict of the original 1974 Wertmüller Italian classic. Yet, after watching Ritchie’s remake, it’s hard not to notice how little the new “Swept Away” has in common with Wertmüller’s original. Remakes are usually poor creative choices; there is always a higher burden of expectation and comparison with an original masterpiece that hardly ever turns out to be as good as the original creation. However, audience-pleasing seems not to be Ritchie’s goal – the remake of “Swept Away” opened in only 200 theaters nationwide. Ritchie’s remake results in an unconvincing, puritanical version of the original love-story. One can hardly believe that this is the same director of “Snatch,” as the decision to strip the plot of violence and its scathing language likewise seem to be out of character for both Ritchie and Madonna (who are no strangers to controversy).

In Daly’s article, Ritchie states that a contemporary audience “would not stomach the racial insults and violence of the original. You can kill as many people as you like, but don’t slap a bird.” Instead, he anesthetizes his remake from racial slurs and violence, replacing controversy with more acceptable PC versions that will not offend American and Anglo-Saxon audiences. With all the talk and expectations (or lack thereof) of Madonna’s performance, it is clear that while Melato and Giannini, Sr. are the unsurpassed protagonists of the original film, here, LANGUAGE is the ultimate star.

Yes, language, and not just Italian language, but regional Italian dialects through whose cadence politics, ideology, culture and sexuality are unraveled. The decision to strip the scathing language substructure from the remake is a catastrophic adaptation choice that ultimately dooms Ritchie’s film.

In defense of Ritchie and Madonna, the original film’s subtitles are a poor rendition of the Italian dialogue and the message of the original Italian script cannot be fully understood by non-Italian-speaking audiences. Because of this language barrier, Ritchie and Madonna misunderstand some very important scenes and misinterpret Wertmüller’s film as being “more about sex and lust, and the characters desiring each other physically.” Madonna and Ritchie are hardly prudes, nor is the failure of the remake due to Madonna’s performance, or Ritchie’s lack of talent. In fact, apart from the translation barriers, the film direction, cinematography and script are quite good.

I.

Language is the central element that supports the original film; Wertmüller chooses the film’s characters and their dialects carefully. First, there is Mariangela Melato, a blonde, blue-eyed northern Italian, representative of rich, capitalist, ‘white’ Italy. She speaks Milanese-Italian with a French *r* inflection, typical of Northern Italian pride. Giancarlo Giannini, Sr., a dark-skinned, scruffy, uncouth, uneducated Southern Italian, speaks with a thick Sicilian accent and is representative of the lowest Italian social class – a poor and

southern ‘black’ Italy. The yacht guest, who constantly argues with Melato about politics, speaks ‘romanesco,’ an uncouth Italian dialect of the lower working classes in Rome. Although he is articulate and opinionated, and appears to be a white-Italian, his accent and communist views betray his working class, southern origins. To complete this potpourri of Italian socio-ethnic types, Giannini’s work colleague is a Neapolitan, whose wit, energy and make-the-best-of-it philosophy embody the Neapolitan ‘veracita’ (no-nonsense attitude).

The settings of the film are the first sign of Wertmüller’s pun and caustic sense of humor: she takes a Milanese, a Sicilian, a Roman and a Neapolitan (representative of irreconcilable Italian types) and sets them on a yacht (each performing chores appropriate with their social status) in the middle of the Mediterranean. A perfect recipe for disaster, Wertmüller pushes the envelope even further when she decides to strand the two most opposite and irreconcilable Italian stereotypes on a deserted island: Melato and Giancarlo Giannini, Sr.

Melato’s constant verbal abuse and Giannini, Sr.’s physical violence are initially the only means of communication between the rich, capitalist “white-Italian” and the poor, Sicilian, “black-Italian” fisherman. Melato and Giannini, Sr. are unable to interact linguistically because they can barely understand each other. Their incommunicability is a complex mixture of vocabulary and value-system incompatibility, not one of regional accents. Giannini, Sr. uses violence as language, as a defensive/aggressive reaction against his educational and socio-cultural shortcomings, of which Melato makes him painfully and constantly aware. Throughout the film, Giannini, Sr. insists that Melato address him as Mr. Carunchio or as Master. He needs retribution for the humiliations he suffered as an underdog in Italian society, and takes his revenge by profusely slapping Melato (whenever he is at a loss for words which is constantly), who embodies all the evils that perpetrate his misery and humiliation. In the so-called ‘rape-scene,’ the apex of Giannini’s rage occurs when he enumerates the reasons he hits her – above all, that Italian rich capitalist have made the poor afraid of living. The rape never physically occurs, only psychologically through racial slurs, and derisive and denigrating remarks (i.e. nigger, spartacus etc.). In the ‘rape scene,’ Giannini, Sr. explains to Melato that he is in total control now and that she must fall deeply in love with him before they consummate sex, which she eventually does. In the adversity of their living conditions, she begins to cooperate with him and they bond on a very raw, primordial level. Starved for human affection, a humbled and more human Melato prostrates herself at Giannini’s feet and their love affair begins.

Stranded on a deserted island in a time capsule, Melato and Giannini, Sr. become Adam and Eve reborn, free from social conventions and prejudice; Wertmüller’s philanthropy is well-rooted in Italian realism and awareness that such ideals of democracy and justice can only exist outside of society in a surreal world. The characters now find themselves in a reversed survival-of-the-fittest mode. Whereas Melato had the upper hand on the yacht as the strongest specimen of white, capitalist Italy, she becomes overpowered by the illiterate, uncouth, proletarian Giannini, who is well-adapted in the primitive island environment and able to survive with the bare necessities. There is a very poignant scene

in both films when the two characters lie naked on a dune after lovemaking. Stripped of their prejudices, the characters are emotionally naked and relate simply as human beings.

This is when love sprouts and Wertmüller's controversial sodomy scene occurs. Ritchie, on the other hand, misinterprets the sodomy scene of the original film and removes it from his remake. In Daly's article, he states that audiences "could not stomach it... and that buggery is no longer in fashion like it used to be." Yet, this scene is about the culmination of Melato's love for Giannini, Sr. – it is about sodomy only by default. Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking cultures share a history of Puritanism that is profoundly embedded in their linguistic subconscious, which inevitably shapes their ideology and perception of reality. Moreover, the English subtitles do not do justice to Wertmüller's script as very important bits of dialogue are at times completely omitted, perhaps due to subtitling need for screen conciseness.

II.

By looking at this sodomy scene and its language closer, we come to understand where and how the Anglo-Saxon perspective trivializes and misinterprets Wertmüller's controversial yet pure love act.

Melato and Giannini are making love, and Melato tells him that he is the alpha male – "what man was like in nature, before everything changed and he should have been her first love." Giannini replies that if there is a first, then a second will follow, as if Melato were foreseeing herself with other partners. Melato reassures him and explains that he should have been the first and only man. She further explains that she is sorry she is not a virgin; he should have been the one to deflower her, to leave his mark on her. It is at this point that an ecstatically transfixed Melato whispers in the uncouth ear of Giannini, Sr. "sodomizzami" (sodomize me). This request baffles Giannini, clueless to the meaning of the word, and he underplays his ignorance by defensively stating that he is "not in the mood." Melato then tells him that he is her first real man and begs him again to sodomize her. Giannini, Sr. becomes defensive and suspicious of Melato's erudition and tells her that he is proud to be an illiterate ignorant and he does not know anything about rich people's perversions such as "sotorizzami" (meaningless onomatopoeic word) or "sotorazzami" (sotorocket me) as he cannot even pronounce the word. Melato, then, apologizes and turns her back to him, hinting at the meaning of the word. Giannini, Sr. glances at Melato's back, confused; finally, he understands and asks her why she makes such a big fuss for a simple sexual act, wishing she would call things by their own name. Melato replies it would be a vulgarity and one cannot utter vulgarities during an act of love. For Giannini, Sr., there are no vulgarities in love – vulgarity is a bourgeois invention.

Giannini, Sr. does not dismiss Melato's sodomy "request as decadent" as Ritchie thinks, rather, as a 'much ado about nothing' statement; nor is their relationship merely "about sex and lust" (as Ritchie and Madonna understand it). The fact that this sharp, well-spoken English director misses this nuance demonstrates the essence of this article: we understand reality within the spectrum of our native languages and it is difficult to detach

ourselves from the cultural ideology embedded within one's language, thought, and culture. In this case, the Anglo-Saxon Puritan perspective overpowers the foreign Italian portrayal of unbounded love.

Ritchie's adaptation of Wertmüller's script is not without its merits; his sentence about the laws of capitalism initially uttered by Madonna on the yacht and reiterated by Giannini, Jr. on the island is an excellent transposition of the Italian original, harmonizing Wertmüller's convoluted script into a concise, effective sentence. Another witty twist of Ritchie's script is the name 'Pipi' (for 'Pepe'), a literal pronunciation of the abbreviation of Giannini, Jr.'s name Giuseppe. In fact, 'pipi' is a word for penis in Italian, mostly used by children to refer to their penis in a non-offensive manner. When used as an actual name, this would be the equivalent of calling someone "a dick." Also, the name Guido is a good adaptation of some of Melato's slurs in Wertmüller's original script. The name Guido is a common Italian first name, carrying no particular meaning. In American-English, however, it becomes a racial slur of sorts as it refers to someone of Italian-American origins who is a gaudy macho type – a greasy, pimpy, open-shirted, hairy-chested, gold-chain-danglin' sleazoid,¹ too perfectly appropriate for this rendition.

Still, Ritchie's adaptation choice of Americans, Italians and Greeks (rather than solely Americans of different social classes) distorts Wertmüller's original message about the incommunicability and irreconcilable diversity of different ethnic groups and social classes belonging to the same society and culture. Had the film been about a white Madonna getting stranded on an island with a poor, uncouth, Italian-American or Hispanic Guido, the film would have retained a stronger and more pertinent message, as racism among foreigners seems more acceptable than racism among ethnically diverse citizens of the same country.

Likewise, the use of the word 'hope' is a clever linguistic pun in Wertmüller's original script. When Melato and Giannini, Sr. are stranded on the dinghy in the middle of the Mediterranean, they ponder over the possibilities of being rescued. Melato uses the word hope casually to mean 'let's hope that we will be rescued momentarily,' accustomed as she is to having everything her way. On the other hand, a doubtful Giannini, Sr. states less convincingly 'let's hope,' and when questioned about the uncertainty of his tone, he replies by citing an Italian proverb that "hope is always the last one to die." After Melato and Giannini are rescued, Wertmüller reiterates this 'hope' theme once again ironically, as Giannini's wife is lodging at Motel Hope.

But hope only has place in Wertmüller's world, as it comes crashing down under the weight of social prejudice and injustice. Melato and Giannini, Sr. are terribly aware of it during their captivity, whereas Madonna and Giannini, Jr. seem oblivious to it. When Melato declares to Giannini, Sr. that her love for him is true and she never loved anyone before him, he is well aware that her love is conditional and the result of extraordinary circumstances. He realizes she would never have had the courage to stroll about Milan with a Southerner such as himself. Explaining to him that what happened to them is an

¹ Robert L. Chapman, PhD Abridged 2nd Edition of the Dictionary of American Slang. © Harper Collins, 1998.

unrepeatable miracle in such a cruel social world, she says “society is a monstrous machine that deforms and cripples us all.” Melato utters Wertmüller’s credo about the potential hope for humanity suffocated by an unforgiving harsh reality.

III.

Obviously, this film, like all Wertmüller’s films, is a sad portrayal of Italian society and culture – specifically of human nature. Her tone is caustic, unforgiving, and above all unapologetic. This love story is doomed from the beginning. The only ending that would be truly realistic is the break-up, with the two characters returning to their stations once the romance is over. After all, it was created two decades before divorce became a common occurrence for royalty as well as ordinary people (as Melato represents Italian ‘royalty’).

Ritchie misses many nuances of the original film, mostly because of the language barrier and specificity of the socio-historical-political-ethnic references of Wertmüller’s script. Thereby, when Madonna and Ritchie state in Daly’s interview they “did not think that Melato underwent a transformation in the original film,” again we are in the presence of a linguistic and conceptual misunderstanding. Ritchie changes the ending of his remake by shifting the responsibility of the final betrayal to a third party: Madonna’s tycoon husband manipulates the situation to keep his trophy-wife for himself, as Madonna, unlike Melato, is ready to follow Giannini, Jr., the love of her life.

In Wertmüller’s original, Melato undergoes a tremendous transformation, still terribly aware of the complete and utter rejection she would suffer if she were to abandon her life of privilege for her Sicilian mate. Her love is true and profound, and her ‘transformation’ does not lie in the fact that Melato is not willing to give everything up for Giannini, Sr. Rather, unlike Madonna in Ritchie’s version, she is able to finally see Giannini as a human being, instead of a racially inferior being. In fact, she overcomes her prejudices – a pretty radical transformation, given the deep-rootedness of Italian racial segregation.

Wertmüller’s true love is for fairy tales, not reality. Discrimination and social injustices are complex issues which cannot be overcome by love alone. Melato has been touched by true love and she will never be the same again – she has experienced the pain of sacrifice. Much like Audrey Hepburn’s character in the 1950’s film “Roman Holiday,” Melato must give up the love of her life – it belongs to the illusions of fantasy.

As a member of the Italian audience, it would be ideal to fantasize of the rich and privileged Melato evolving from a superficial brat into an enlightened woman who will never look upon Southerner minorities as she had in the past – irreversibly changed by this experience, love has widened her horizons and made her a complete human being! But, let’s face it – we live in the American material world and ultimately, she is the material girl.