

Are Italian Audiences Lost in Domestication? The Case of *The Piano*

Conclusions

My Research

In recent decades, the demand for films to cross national and linguistic boundaries has resulted in the explosion of the field of media translation. My PhD project analyzes the way that dubbing and subtitling of New Zealand films and their Italian critical reception condition the representation of New Zealand in the Italian imaginary. It aims at contributing to the on-going dialogue in cultural translation studies regarding the representation of nations and cultures to foreign audiences and to the creation of a space of translation between cultures. The films selected for my study - *An Angel at my Table* (1990), *The Piano* (1993), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), *Once Were Warriors* (1994), *Whale Rider* (2002) - unfold a number of cultural, social and historical characteristics of New Zealand. As a result they lend themselves to the discussion of how translation for the cinema, as a mode of Intercultural exchange, affects cultural representations, and may hence contribute to define this country to Italians. The case study illustrated here is based on the film *The Piano* by Jane Campion, the first New Zealand film to attain international success and to contribute to situating this country on an international stage for many audiences, the Italian one included, with little previous cultural knowledge of the social and political history of New Zealand.

Methodology

My project draws on previous studies on the reception of the selected films in different European countries, and it is grounded on Cultural Studies in Translation as the main disciplinary framework. Due to the high interdisciplinarity of the topic, my work is also informed with theoretical debates in other disciplines, primarily Audiovisual Translation. By combining **film textual analysis** with **case studies** providing a comparative examination of both original and dubbed/subtitled versions of the films, my project explores some of the problems entangled in the intercultural transfer of the selected films, and identifies strategies used for the translation of culturally-specific items - elements of New Zealand and Māori culture, verbal and/or visual, peculiar of a specific cultural system, that could pose problems for the target audience (Antonini and Chiaro 2005; Franco Aixelá 1996). In this case study, I focus on the process of **intercultural transfer** and how it may have influenced the film's reception in Italy. I also consider how this process further "domesticates" or "exoticises" the source culture (Venuti 1995). This approach is based on the fact that an analysis of press reviews, blogs' and forum posts has revealed a domestication process, not in the film translation's phase, but by critics who relied heavily on Italian cultural products to explain the film. Hence, my primary questions are:

- does the Italian audience miss or not fully understand some aspects of the film, accounting for a certain degree of **cultural loss**?
- Are certain aspects of the film distorted or misunderstood due to the strategy employed by Italian critics to make the film more accessible?

Martina Depentor — Doctoral Candidate
School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics
University of Auckland



In New Zealand

The Piano provoked controversy and disagreement. The **representation of Māori** was particularly contentious. While some scholars regarded the film as a dangerous reiteration of negative stereotypes about Māori, others considered it an important reference point for discussing their contemporary representations. According to Stephen Turner (1999), *The Piano* may have put New Zealand on the map for a world audience but the image of the place it advanced does not stand uncontested, especially for its whitened history in which Māori are treated as background. The assimilation of Māori into nature prompted critical reactions particularly from a **postcolonial studies perspective**. Anne Hardy and Jane Roscoe (1996) mount a strong "whiteness" critique of the film as it relies on black/white opposition for its framing of Māori/Pakeha relations. Leonie Pihama criticised the movie for providing constructions of Māori that are positioned in the colonial gaze (1996). It was therefore striking from a New Zealand perspective to see overseas critics devoting their attention to the film's feminine gaze, romantic heroine and gender issues and asking few questions about the representation of Māori. Yet, while for New Zealanders *The Piano* misrepresents Māori and romanticizes the country, for the world, it is a romantic story of settlement set in a wild, undiscovered country.



Although differences in perception are not necessarily negative as unfamiliar material can have the appeal of **exoticism**, my aim was to determine whether, through the critic's emphasis on domestication, cultural aspects of the film might have escaped their notice and, consequently, the general audiences' as well. From this preliminary analysis, the great international success of the film in Italy seems steeped in the **universal nature of the story** it tells, one with which many women can identify, even though the interest has been stimulated also by its exotic features - unfamiliar landscape, native people of New Zealand. While dubbing itself results in a linguistically "domesticated" film, film translators have produced a linguistically faithful rendition of the script and of the film's "otherness".

However, Italian critics provided a **Eurocentric "domesticated" experience** by identifying in the foreign culture various examples that Italian viewers could relate to their own cultural heritage, probably in an attempt to clarify unfamiliar aspects that could pose problem of interpretation for the average Italian viewer with little knowledge of New Zealand. Italian audiences therefore miss or do not fully understand some aspects of the film, accounting for a certain **degree of cultural loss**. For example, although Italian critics recognize the role of European Colonizers in depriving Māori of their culture and traditions, they do not explore the complexities of the Māori-Pakeha relationship. This lack of cultural knowledge of the history of Oceania leads to some serious misinterpretations, exemplified for instance by inaccurate comparisons between Māori and Aboriginal people of Australia.

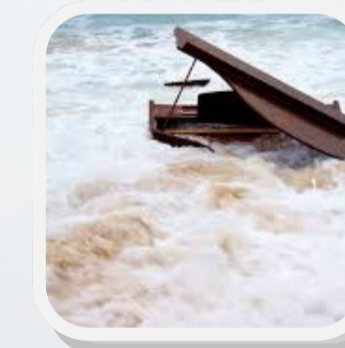
In Italy

The Piano has been praised for its sensuality and its visionary brilliance, described as a melancholic love story in which many women can identify themselves, sophisticated and passionate, a film that advances strong female characters who are opposed to a world of rules (Gatti 1998).

- *Il Mattino* (1993): "dazzling photography, slow-paced, sophisticated music, cruelty and transgression strategically planned"
- *La Stampa* (1993): "mysterious, violent and exquisite, a film that combines romanticism, fiery sensuality and excellent technique, confirming the rare talent of the director".
- *filmtv.it* (2003): "one of the few examples of a sexualized feminine cinematic gaze".

The **landscape** is another important element of the film's fascination, as it contributes to the idea of a wild, pure New Zealand, a place so magical and unspoiled that "the bush takes on different colors in keeping with the feelings of the characters" (Massara 2003).

Italian critics draw **parallels with various Italian artists** and their works - paintings, books, films - in search of familiar elements that Italian viewers can relate to, engaging in a process of **domestication**:



The piano stranded on a wild beach is likened to the paintings of **Giorgio De Chirico** for the metaphysical and dreamlike atmosphere and juxtaposition of incongruous objects.



Well known feminist writer **Dacia Maraini's Marianna Ucrìa** (*The Silent Duchess*), a deaf and dumb Sicilian Duchess proposes the same strong metaphor of the historical silence of women, as Jane Campion's Ada



The theatrical pageant of "Bluebeard" in *The Piano* is interrupted by Māori, who confuse the performance with reality, and try to save Bluebeard's wives about to be behead. Similarly, in "*Cosa sono le nuvole?*" by Italian film director, writer and political figure, Pier Paolo Pasolini, a reinterpretation of *Othello* is interrupted by middle-class spectators, who storm the stage to save Desdemona from murder.

