

Altruistic Reconstructions

An Examination of Charles Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology in *Man of La Mancha* (1972) and *Zorba the Greek* (1964)

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Narratives, both real and fictional, are a necessary means to learn about the past (upon which the present is predicated). Moreover, almost all narratives have the capacity of being reinterpreted or re-experienced in a new light. Jacques Derrida uses the term “binary oppositions” for conceptualising experiences within narratives. For instance, “we understand reason as the opposite of emotion, masculine as the opposite of feminine, civilized as the opposite of primitive, and so on” (Tyson 254). Moreover, he believes that they form “little hierarchies”, because “one term in the pair is always privileged, or considered superior to the other” (254). Therefore, “by identifying which member of the opposition is privileged, one can discover something about the ideology promoted by that production” (254). After deconstruction, hierarchies among the binary opposites could be inverted, but this will “destabilize both hierarchies, leaving them in a condition of undecidability” (Abrams 82).

Don Quixote (1605–1615) by Miguel de Cervantes and *Zorba the Greek* (1946) by Nikos Kazantzakis are not sacred metanarratives, but both are infused with Christian elements. The latter is more critical of religious dogmatism since it was written in more modern times by an author who was under the influence of Nietzsche and other major critics of fundamental Christianity. The interplay of binary oppositions is crucial for uncovering facets of the ideological framework behind the novels, but a form of reconstruction is required to fully understand them. These arguments are supported by Charles Taylor's views. “As a philosopher, Taylor's concerns are focused on what he calls philosoph-

ical anthropology, an effort to expose the roots of the contemporary sense of what it means to be human” (The Malaise of Modernity 00:01:00–11). Taylor believes that the past “can be remembered, reconstructed, and re-interpreted just as we imaginatively project ourselves and our purposes into the future. [. . .] We see our lives as stories that unfold, and in which we move closer to or further away from different strongly valued goods and goals” (Abbey 5). Therefore, Taylor's ideas may be used to highlight the transition of the narratives from novel to film adaptation, namely *Man of La Mancha* (1972) and *Zorba the Greek* (1964). It is for this reason that this survey scrutinises the more modern film adaptations of the two magnum opuses. The films project the undermining of detrimental beliefs, and, in contrast to the novels, give more agency to female characters. This is achieved via melodramatic satire as well as tense scenes that are more serious.

CHARLES TAYLOR'S BODY OF THEORIES

In *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992), Taylor elaborates on what he calls the “three malaises” of modernity. He pinpoints “individualism” as the initial source of the malaises. According to Taylor, it renders individuals “to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn't control” (2). The threat that individualism poses may lead to an excessive reliance on selfhood, neglecting the past narratives in history. The downside of this excessive individualism “narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society” (4). This self-centering later leads to the second

malaise which Taylor calls “the primacy of instrumental reason” (5), a “kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success” (5). Taylor further maintains that instrumental reasoning has nested in most societies, especially in the Western world. “The fear is that things that ought to be determined by other criteria will be decided in terms of efficiency or ‘cost-benefit’ analysis, that the independent ends that ought to be guiding our lives will be eclipsed by the demand to maximize output” (5).

In Taylor’s analysis, the first two aforementioned malaises pave the way for a third one on “the political level” (8). Not only is this a threat to the flow of narrative production, it can also create mute citizens who neither care about past narratives, nor want to exchange in dialogue with others. By building on the notions of Alexis de Tocqueville, Taylor depicts a “society in which people end up as the kind of individuals who are ‘enclosed in their own hearts’ [that] is one where few will want to participate actively in self-government” (9). In sum, Taylor’s delineation of the three malaises could be described as thus: the first leads to “a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom” (10).

A BRIEF CONTEXTUALISATION OF *DON QUIXOTE* AND *ZORBA THE GREEK*

Cervantes for the Spanish/Hispanic world is like Shakespeare for the British/Anglophone world. The knight-errant, Don Quixote, is such a flamboyant character in Western literature that the word “quixotic” found its way into the English language. The definition of the modern novel as an extended form of narrative owes a great deal to this masterpiece. Cervantes “uses fiction to represent different ways of thinking and ways of being as well

as to capture the socioeconomic world in which his characters live” (Schwarz 25). His work depicts “the emerging field of ‘global’ literary studies and draws analogies between the historical period of pre-Enlightenment modernity in the Mediterranean world and the concerns of twenty-first-century post-national states” (D’haen and Dhondt 7–8).

Zorba the Greek revolves around the life of the well-educated Basil (the Boss), a half-British, half-Greek who befriends Zorba, an old and ordinary Greek labourer. Basil narrates the story of his friendship with Zorba and how they both move to Crete, Basil’s native village, in order to restore an ancient mine that belonged to his ancestors. Zorba’s character in particular, with his self-indulgent, easygoing manner, has “offered westerners a prototype of liberation” (Hnaraki 26). Furthermore, Kazantzakis’s novel is considered an “attraction for the western society, which, tired from logic and abundance, admired Zorba, a daring, spontaneous hero, who refused conventions and admitted his emotional passions” (26). *Zorba the Greek* presents “a ‘transitional age’ in which the human race was poised between the decadence of the old civilization and the fulfillment of a new, authentic, vital, and liberating order” (Berke).

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *MAN OF LA MANCHA* (1972) AND *ZORBA THE GREEK* (1964) BASED ON TAYLOR’S NOTIONS

Don Quixote does not yield to instrumental reasoning because he selflessly aims at attaining a greater good, but his plans culminate in defeat. Magdalena Barbaruk believes that “Taylor would presumably see Don Quixote as a patron of restoration of the proper meaning of the authenticity ideal and renewal of human practices [...] had the knight errant been true to his own ‘originality’ instead of imitating knight-errants” (45). Yet, one must add that *Man of La Mancha* has achieved this even more: Quixote’s militant individualism is adequately portrayed in

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the movie, but the kindheartedness of the knight is redoubled. Notwithstanding, Barbaruk maintains that:

If culture is conceived as the cultivation of the soul, we should see the knight-errant as an agent today and approach him in the framework of the “care of the self” or Taylorian “ethics of authenticity.” Don Quixote takes the helm of his life in his hands and engages in combat for the world and against the human condition defined through modern states and sentiments: boredom, passivity, inertia and banality of existence. (45)

Quixotic characteristics are also present in Zorba, but he does not possess the same degree of selflessness. Don Quixote is deeply in love and has promised to remain chaste. He considers it his duty to fight evil, suffering during the process. Zorba, on the other hand, is more of an epicurean: he falls in line with the primacy of instrumental reason. Nevertheless, he is a cultivated person with many sophisticated remarks that the Boss finds very interesting. The Boss admits that the “meaning of the words, art, love, beauty, purity, passion, all this was made clear to me by the simplest of human words uttered by this workman” (*Zorba the Greek* 20). It does not take long for Zorba to teach him “about ‘real life’ and how to live and enjoy living” (Elsman 44). Before engaging with the multifarious life narratives of Zorba, Basil was a self-enclosed individual, similar to those Taylor describes on the political level. In point of fact, it is Zorba who leads him towards a more profound state of individualism. “Zorba opens up genuine possibilities for the elevation of both the flesh and the spirit to a higher (and more substantial) level of understanding and meaningfulness in individual and social life” (Kovačević 195). Boss and worker (Zorba) form another binary opposition, but Zorba reverses this. The binary is ultimately shattered because the two become quite fond of one another. Zorba’s personal life narratives are the main reason Basil learns to embrace real life outside of his cherished books.

In *Man of La Mancha*, Peter O’Toole plays both Cervantes and Don Quixote. At the beginning, Cervantes is imprisoned by the Inquisition. While waiting in captivity, the inmates decide to have a trial of their own. As an embittered man, Cervantes tries to defend his fictional narrative. He hails it for being real, because individuality was the crux of the matter he wanted to address. He wrote his book while in prison as the only means for countering the suffocating atmosphere the Inquisition had imposed on the population at that time. In that era’s political realm, few had the literacy or even the motivation to question long held beliefs. Therefore, he becomes a “hypothetical quixotic anthropologist” who longs for “a political and ethical configuration, one that values idealism and contestation at epistemological, experiential, and political levels” (Maskens and Blanes 250).

Basil’s character, too, strongly upholds the rights of others in society. He is not a ruthless miser, wanting to be obeyed at all times. In contrast to his boss, Zorba is not very lenient with the miners. In one scene, the workers run outside of the mine after hearing a loud creaking sound. Zorba is the last to exit and is angered that they have left axes inside the mine. He starts shouting at them for the loss they have caused, but Basil intervenes, asking Zorba to stop at once. The Boss mentions his relief that they are all safe and decides to call it a day. At this point Zorba says: “Boss, you better make up your mind. Are you or are you not a gosh darn capitalist?” (00:45:16–00:45:23). In response, the Boss laughs, but says nothing. He refuses to exploit the uneducated Cretans, once again distancing himself from the instrumental rationality that thrives on monetary gain alone.

Sophia Loren, who plays Don Quixote’s beloved Dulcinea, is perhaps the most significant narrative innovation in *Man of La Mancha*. Her real name is Aldonza, but under the spell of his insanity, the knight imagines her as a noble lady called Dulcinea del Toboso. This character never physically appears in the novel and the knight never gets to meet her. In fact, she is described as an ugly female

character who works on a farm and has a masculine body that reeks of sweat and a coarse voice when she shouts (*Don Quixote* 217–218). However, in *Don Quixote*'s imagination she is the most complete and beautiful damsel ever. Her character in the film is very different; she works at an inn where she cooks, cleans, and is caught up in prostitution.

Don Quixote's arrival creates another binary opposition between himself and the debased crowd that dwells within the inn. Once again, the knight proves how remote instrumental reasoning is to his character, as he has fallen in love with a woman he has never actually met in person. Although his stubborn imagination seem ethereal, he at least stays clear of the dark side of individualism about which Taylor warned. Despite this fact, his tender song does subdue Aldonza's anger for a while: "I have dreamed thee too long. Never seen thee or touched thee. But known thee with all of my heart. Half a prayer, half a song. Thou hast always been with me. Though we have been always apart. [...] I have sought thee, sung thee, dreamed thee Dulcinea" (00:36:00–00:38:02). These loving words are diametrically opposed to the instrumental intentions of the muleteers. Before the knight's arrival at the inn, Aldonza had been singing about her misery, addressing the brutes, but she was also presenting herself as a distinct character. This is one of the main merits of the film in contrast to the novel. Aldonza (Dulcinea) is given agency to speak and defend herself against the crowd. In the novel, she is only a classical muse that exists in *Don Quixote*'s psyche, an illusory figure that is one-sidedly praised by him.

The widow, played by Irene Pappas in *Zorba the Greek*, is another important female character. She hardly ever speaks in the movie, but her actions clearly function as a shield against a debased group of villagers who resort to instrumental reason. By refusing to marry the youngest son of the Chief, she retains her autonomy. The widow's defiant manner creates yet another binary opposition, disobeying against surrendering. After his son commits suicide, the Chief and a number of men round her up for revenge. Zorba tries to save the widow, but the Chief

slits her throat. This tragic scene depicts the price one has to pay for individualism. The widow lost her life because she was outnumbered by a majority of villagers who only viewed her as a trophy to be snatched. Moreover, the silence of the religious authorities makes them culpable on the political level that allowed such a crime to take place.

Madame Hortense, a French woman, is another important female character. With her wealth, she had managed to keep the Cretans at bay. With the exception of Zorba, the men did not like her because of her old age. Old women sit around her deathbed, counting down the seconds for her to die, some even start looting her house before she gives up the ghost. This makes Zorba furious: he grabs them by the hair and throws them back, gently whispering to Hortense: "It's me Zorba. Don't be afraid" (02:05:35–02:05:38). When she finally dies, the villagers strip her house completely. This level of unsentimentality is a sign of decadence on the political level in Crete, with people only focusing on material gain, encapsulated within a restrictive religious society.

Unlike the novel, in which Basil and Zorba part ways, the two of them exchange a friendly dialogue at the end of the film. Zorba admits how much he loves Basil but urges him to be more impulsive. In other words, Zorba wants Basil to make a pattern of life that suits him well: "You've got everything except one thing,

madness. A man needs a little madness, or else [...] he never dares to cut the rope and be free" (02:17:55–02:18:10). Their plans for earning money fail, but the two friends laugh and dance together, ridiculing the naivety of the priests that ruled the village. The closing scene of the film foreshadows a future, where perhaps greater happiness may ensue. The ending of *Man of La Mancha* is similarly promising. After being summoned by the Inquisition, Cervantes and

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his stage manager (James Coco/Sancho) walk up the dungeon stairs while the deeply touched inmates pay their regards by singing “The Impossible Dream”. This final scene also projects the determinacy of positive individualism, which may hinder the instrumental reasoning percolating through the political level of society.

Spotting binary oppositions is one means of highlighting the power structures and hierarchies within a narrative. However, this method is insufficient because it is somewhat superficial for a tenable reconstruction. On the other hand, Taylor’s anthropological philosophy traces the roots of major transitions in many different zeitgeists. His views show how positive changes took place, but he also warns about the malaises of modernity. According to Taylor, the negative aspects of individualism and instrumental reasoning give rise to a political realm in which the flow of narratives is obstructed. This also means that constructive critical outlooks are abandoned by individuals in such a society.

Due to the narrow scope of the article, I was not able to elaborate on Taylor’s lengthy outlooks in detail. Some of his ideas are embedded within his Catholicism, but this article focused on the more general notions of his anthropological philosophy. Nevertheless, his theories provide sufficient material for an in-depth study of *Don Quixote* and *Zorba the Greek*, as well as their film adaptations. Furthermore, the religious transfigurations can be analysed based on his views. *Man of La Mancha* and *Zorba the Greek* are two film adaptations that greatly document paradigmatic shifts from their written narratives. Above all, the films present changes that are not included in the novels’ texts and contexts. The role and articulacy of female characters in the production of new narratives is perhaps the most important change one can detect. Finally, the film versions also indicate vital anthropological perspectives that extract past narratives and reconfigure them in a new light.

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