Peter Weir's Master and Commander: A case of the imaginary concrete

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Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World, directed by Peter Weir, screenplay by Weir and John Collee, based on the novels by Patrick O'Brian

The first impression of Peter Weir's film *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is the striking attention to naturalistic detail. His dramatization of British naval warfare from the Napoleonic era, based on Patrick O'Brian's popular series of Aubrey-Maturin novels, gives a vivid picture of life at sea and the bloody carnage of close-quarters gunnery and hand-to-hand combat.

For one who, like this writer, has read O'Brian's works with enjoyment, any serious attempt at bringing them to film could only be welcomed. But in this case, the wealth of concrete details masks a distortion of the real historical and social context.

Patrick O'Brian set his historical novels, expounding the adventures of British navy captain Jack Aubrey and ship's surgeon Stephen Maturin, in the first two decades of the 19th century. O'Brian, who died in 2001, was a careful student of this period, producing non-fiction studies of the British navy in the era of Nelson, as well as biographies of the British naturalist Joseph Banks and of Pablo Picasso.

With 20 volumes and over 7,000 pages, crammed with details of shipboard life and naval combat, intricately plotted, the Aubrey-Maturin series provides plenty of material to select from. Weir has used the title of the first book, *Master and Commander*, combining it with a plot line derived from the tenth volume, *Far Side of the World*.

There is one significant change, however. O'Brian set *Far Side of the World* during the War of 1812, and has Aubrey and Maturin pursuing a powerful American frigate around Cape Horn and into the Pacific, where the American ship intends to wreak havoc among British whalers. At least half a dozen of the Aubrey-Maturin books involve the US-British naval conflict of 1812-1814—a fertile source for the historical novelist, since this war included many spectacular ship-to-ship duels. But portraying America as the enemy is obviously not a paying proposition in the Hollywood of 2003, so the ship has been changed to a French vessel. It is Frenchmen who are slaughtered in the final battle scenes and the French tricolor flag, not the Stars and Stripes, that is struck when the enemy surrenders.

This change alone would not be enough to condemn the film—the majority of O'Brian's work concerns British-French conflict, on land and sea, and there are many scenes in the Aubrey-Maturin books that resemble those of the naval combat in the film version of *Master and Commander* (indeed, the scenes of maneuvering and fighting are perhaps the most faithful to the spirit of the novels).

But other alterations suggest that the raw material of O'Brian's novels has been reshaped to serve a conformist agenda. By far the most deleterious change is the downgrading of the character of Maturin, the ship's surgeon, who becomes little more than a well-meaning cipher, a good-hearted, somewhat unrealistic nag on the fearsome warrior Aubrey, a contrast underscored by the casting of the low-key Paul Bettany against Russell Crowe, the reigning Hollywood leading man.

In the novels, Maturin is a fully equal character. He serves not only as ship's surgeon and naturalist, the role depicted on screen, but as a private agent for British intelligence working with anti-Napoleonic forces in Spain and South America—he's of mixed Irish and Catalan extraction and fluent in Spanish. A former member of the United Irishmen, which spearheaded the great uprising of 1798 against British rule, Maturin has

concluded that Napoleonic tyranny is an even greater political danger, and acts accordingly by enlisting in the British navy, even though as a Catholic he cannot be an officer.

These political complexities are never hinted at in the film, nor the popular-democratic side of Maturin's character, as he inwardly debates the tragedy of Ireland and seeks to foment revolts in South American countries against Spanish colonialism.

The Aubrey-Maturin relationship is also quite complex. They are married to cousins, longtime shipmates and friends with opposite personalities—one bluff and outgoing, the other saturnine and secretive, and, like Sherlock Holmes, addicted to laudanum. Aubrey is the unquestioned leader in navigation and naval warfare, but in many of the novels it is Maturin who is actually in charge, as the *Surprise* is sent on delicate diplomatic or espionage missions.

Aubrey's characterization in the film is one-dimensional. He's uniformly brilliant. But as one reviewer of O'Brian's novels noted, Aubrey is a lion at sea but an ass on land. He's a great sailor and fighter, but on shore has more than his share of shortcomings as a businessman, politician and husband. (In one of the novels, Aubrey is victimized by a con man and ends up on trial for stock swindling; he is convicted and cashiered from the navy. He is condemned to the pillory—a potentially fatal sentence—but is saved by hundreds of rank-and-file seamen who converge on London to protect him, in what comes close to mutiny. This spirit of fellowship and solidarity is almost completely absent from the film).

It is the relationship between Aubrey and the rank-and-file seamen that is most distorted in Weir's film. In the novels, Aubrey is a captain who cares deeply for the men and rules them with a comparatively light hand. He is notoriously averse to the lash, which is used perhaps once in 20 books, yet an obligatory lash scene finds its way into the film. On the other hand, O'Brian repeatedly portrays Aubrey personally rescuing sailors who have fallen into the water—he's one of the few sailors of his day who can swim. Such incidents are a recurring theme in the novels, but find no place in the film.

Aubrey is portrayed as a patriotic speechmaker, a war leader who inspires the ranks on the basis of a nationalism that is a product of a much later historical period. The British navy of the Napoleonic era, as O'Brian makes clear, numbered sailors of every nation, motivated not by patriotism for the British Empire, of which they had little conception, but by comradeship born of long months together at sea, and loyalty to a captain celebrated as "Lucky Jack" because of his ability to capture lucrative prizes, in which the crew shared.

This distancing of Aubrey from the crew seems the result of a conscious decision by the filmmaker. The first novel of the Aubrey-Maturin series, *Master and Commander,* has a scene in which the captain halts his ship, even when being followed by a more powerful French warship, to rescue a midshipman who has fallen overboard. He saves the sailor, then devises an ingenious method of escaping his pursuer. In the film, Weir stands the incident on its head—Aubrey cuts the drowning man loose to save the ship.

The political implications of this are unmistakable: lives must be sacrificed for the greater good of the nation. The sailors serve as cannon fodder to achieve military victory.

All in all, Weir and his collaborators have produced a film that, despite its visual impact, is ultimately untrue to the original. There is, of course, no ban on an artist significantly reworking material for a different medium. However, O'Brian's canvas, which contains healthy doses of intelligence, humor and compassion, has been cut and trimmed to suit the current retrograde political and cultural climate.