

# THE DILEMMAS OF ADAPTATION: MAKING *TREATMENT FOR SIX CHARACTERS*\*

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For the last ten years of his life Pirandello wished to make a film that could act as a precursor to his seminal 1921 meta-play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.<sup>1</sup> This was to feature his encounters with a Roman family who unwittingly become catalysts for the development of his famous play in that he planned that the film would represent a fictional version of the creative process leading to *Six Characters*. Had the film been realized, there is speculation that it would have marked Pirandello's acting debut, the better allowing him to frame his interest in the ambiguous ethics of the creative process within which a successful author's projective imagination has a disastrous effect on the life of a 'real' family, ending in tragedy. Of course the real event of the premiere of *Six Characters* at the Teatro Valle in 1921 was a disaster for Pirandello—he had to flee the theatre having coins thrown at him—and it is interesting that the final part of *Treatment for Six Characters* also concludes with a fictionalized version of that historical premiere at that same theatre. The

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1 Nina daVinci Nichols and Jana O'Keefe Bazzoni have carried out extensive research on Pirandello's relationship to film and the history and evidence of Pirandello's plans to make a fictional version of the creative process leading to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: my whole project is indebted to their work. See N. daVinci Nichols and J. O'Keefe Bazzoni, *Pirandello and Film* (Lincoln–London, University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Pirandello in fact wrote three separate texts in which he developed his idea, texts which are detailed in *Pirandello and Film* as follows: *Prologo (The Prologue)* written in 1925 (see pp. 139–41); *Film-Novelle (The Scenario)* written in 1928–30 (see pp. 163–80); *The Treatment for Six Characters*, written in 1935 (see pp. 181–89). I have worked specifically with the last text, using this to develop the title of my film *Treatment for Six Characters*. It is this text, also known as *The Treatment for Max Reinhardt*, that I subsequently refer to throughout this essay as 'Pirandello's text'.

link between the two works then forms a curious inverted temporal loop linked by the stage at the Teatro Valle, which Pirandello seems to have conceived of as a space of becoming on several levels. He tried, without success, to get his ideas for a film based on a fictional representation of the creative process leading to his famous play made many times, without success. During a scholarship at the British School at Rome in 2012 I set out to find a way to finally make Pirandello's film.

It may be said that in watching my film you both do and do not see Pirandello's film. A central characteristic of my approach to *Treatment* is that, apart from one crucial sequence, the film does not feature actors. For most of the film's duration, a narrating male voice addresses the audience directly over images of shifting location shots. Pirandello wrote three texts developing his idea for a film version of *Six Characters*. I chose to work with the last of these, which is featured by daVinci Nichols and O'Keefe Bazzoni in *Pirandello and Film*, and is entitled *The Treatment for Six Characters* (see pp. 115–35). They describe this text as follows:

Located in the Reinhardt archives, Theatersammlung Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Vienna. Written in 1935 in English with the collaboration of Saul Colin, Pirandello's English-language secretary, and brought to New York by Pirandello for Max Reinhardt. First published by A. Illiano and G. Bussino, 'Pirandello: progetti filmici sui *Sei personaggi*', *Forum Italicum*, 16 (1982), 119–46.

This text is written in the form of a 1930s 'treatment' for a film studio, and consists of a series of prose paragraphs outlining the plot. In discussing my method of interpretation of this work for a contemporary context I used to joke with the archaeologists at the British School at Rome that I viewed Pirandello's text as every bit as much of a ruin as the buildings and sites they worked with, and that the act of interpretation would necessarily involve translation and adaptation. In this process of adaptation I tried to wrap my film around Pirandello's absent work, which is nevertheless conjured for you by the imagery and sound, and also by the animating voice of Norman Mozzato, a veteran Italian actor who had previously worked with the feted Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky. Underlying my approach was my interest in how it might be possible to make cinema without using film in conventional ways, part of my deliberately oblique approach as a visual artist in exploring what may be called a cinema of the mind. I was keen to maintain the essential elements of the story while also sustaining a sense in which Pirandello's film remained a kind of phantom. This was even though I used the objects and places of Pirandello's text *The Treatment for Six Characters*: the rooms and objects of Pirandello's home in Rome feature strongly in my film; I show the pen and typewriter he might have used to write his text, and also his bed, his books and his personal objects. I also had access to the fashion atelier, the Fondazione Micol Fontana in Rome, which became the rooms of Madame Melloni's fashion

atelier. Crucially I was given access to the Teatro Valle. Being able to use footage from these sites gives the work, and Pirandello's plot, indexical authority even as Pirandello's work remains a conceptual, virtual proposition: my intention was to compel the audience to 'make' Pirandello's film in their imagination as they watch my film unfold. Trying to pull this off was always going to be complex and it became clear to me that I would have to carefully calibrate the relationship between the imagery, the subtitles, the sound and the voice of the narrator. There had to be just enough time for members of the audience also to see their imagined version of Pirandello's film. It was a difficult balancing act but this was greatly supported by Norman Mozzato, who gives a wonderfully resonant narration of the film's plot. I asked Norman to animate and fully possess the characters and story so that his voice also conjures up the absent film for the audience. This somewhat paradoxical structure also makes the work a curious meta-fictional-documentary, surely an effect of the audience being asked to watch two films simultaneously.

I was lucky in gaining extensive access to the theatre where *Six Characters* was premiered. Access of this sort would have been a near-impossibility in the United Kingdom, or at least prohibitively expensive. It provided a considerable opportunity for the development of the film. Added to this, the Teatro Valle is revered in Rome: as well hosting the premiere of *Six Characters* it is a well-preserved baroque theatre, the oldest working theatre in Rome, and also the site of several historic premieres of works by Mozart, Rossini and others. My arrival in Rome coincided with the theatre being under an important political occupation by Fondazione Teatro Valle Occupato Bene Comune,<sup>2</sup> an organization formed by the previous actors, managers and technical staff of the theatre, who for three years lived in and ran the theatre as a form of social and political resistance to the proposed privatization of theatres by the centre-right administration of Silvio Berlusconi. Teatro Valle Occupato collaborated with me, allowing ongoing access to the theatre as well as supporting work with actors and lighting technicians, and on one memorable morning allowing me complete command of the auditorium and stage. Of course, making *Treatment* in this context affected my perception and experience of the film's potential. In particular it highlighted the way the original *Six Characters* play and *Treatment* interrelate and also revealed the innate political conflicts and intensities of both works more clearly. In *Treatment* the 'real' Roman family is signalled as poor and vulnerable to the force of the Author/Pirandello's actions against it and, using forms particular to German Expressionist cinema, Pirandello's film would probably have drawn considerable attention to underlying

2 See the Fondazione's web-site, ><http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it><, for more detail. On 10 August 2014 the Fondazione was forced to vacate the Teatro Valle by the Mayor of Rome. Although this was ostensibly to carry out structural repairs to the theatre, at the time of writing discussions about continuing the Fondazione's ethical approach are ongoing.

class conflict and the moral judgements inherent in the ways an artist or writer exercises choice within the processes of making their work, or fails to, and it is interesting that Pirandello was willing to implicate himself in this as a cipher for wider questions about the interrelationships between creativity, power and ethics. Given the fact I had worked at the Teatro Valle in the broader context of a political occupation I decided I wanted to find a way to link Pirandello's characters, which I proposed as still present (if hidden) at the Teatro Valle ninety-two years after the play's premiere, with the present occupiers of the theatre, Teatro Valle Bene Comune. Taking my cue from Pirandello's implicit aspiration to link *The Treatment for Six Characters* with the historical fate of his play at the Teatro Valle, I thought I would take this further and place the urgency of Pirandello's characters' need to live, to be heard, within the political urgencies of the occupation. Both Pirandello's *The Treatment for Six Characters* and Teatro Valle Bene Comune have moral and ethical concerns at their centre; the moral dilemmas and obfuscations of the individual creator measured here against the wider, moral context of the arts in relationship to society, which is offered by Teatro Valle Bene Comune. Teatro Valle Bene Comune's creed is 'Come l'acqua, come l'aria: liberiamo i saperi' ['Like water, like air, let's reclaim culture'], and of course Pirandello's characters want to make an act of reclamation too—in their case, to reclaim the trajectory of a more fully realized life. Both are ways of saying: 'We want to live!' With this in mind, in my adaptation of Pirandello's text I decided to add a prologue in the form of a kind of Greek chorus. This is clearly marked out from the rest of the film, with the credits to the main film even starting after the prologue finishes. The prologue features footage that was originally out-takes from filming at the Valle, which was interrupted several times. Given that this was an occupied theatre, our filming woke up people sleeping on the upper floors of the theatre, to comical effect. Against these sequences I put the imagined voices of Pirandello's characters, which are proposed as witnessing the production of my film. Using rhythmic speech and the sounds of the body as is particular to the form of a Greek chorus (in fact my characters stomp and hit the floor throughout the film), the chorus directly addresses the audience about the social and political significance of the work it is about to see, as is typical of the form. Bringing Pirandello's *The Treatment for Six Characters* with its often shocking ethical reflections on the moral underpinnings of the creative act into the context of Fondazione Teatro Valle Occupato Bene Comune adds, I would suggest, new dimensions to the underlying risks of Pirandello's unrealized project: Pirandello's film is then not just largely set in the locations he wished but is also placed within a newly intense social and political space whose urgencies add fresh relevance to the underlying risks of Pirandello's unrealized project.

I have observed that *The Treatment for Six Characters* seems to serve as something of a structural reversal of *Six Characters*, though I have no evidence suggesting that this was intended by Pirandello. The conflict between an ideal

character and the living actor, famous in *Six Characters*, becomes for Pirandello the primary source of conflict in his theatrical plays of identity. The play *Six Characters* becomes the interrelation of the actors with characters who are supposedly ‘*esseri vivi, piú vivi di quelli che respirano e vestono panni! Meno reali, forse; ma piú veri!*’ (*Mn* II, 681) [‘beings more alive than those who breathe and wear clothes: beings less real, perhaps, but truer!’],<sup>3</sup> as the character of the Father says in the play. The actors in *Six Characters* are disabused by the characters, part of Pirandello’s well-known conflict, between ‘having form’ and ‘being form’, which is problematized throughout the play. This duality has been explored by Michael Quinn, who describes this conflict as being between ideal character and the living actor—a metaphysical conflict with political overtones based in a hierarchical aesthetic, which Quinn proposes becomes the confrontation of the eternal literary character with the time-bound human actor.<sup>4</sup> In these terms, all that which ‘*ha forma*’ [‘has form’] (the actors) is condemned to continual change and death whereas all that which ‘*è forma*’ [‘is form’] (the characters) is immutable and eternal in both time and space, because of course they are eternal literary characters (*Mn* II, 664; *SC*, p. 81). But in *The Treatment for Six Characters* the characters are in the process of coming into being, they haunt the edges of the work continually. And such is the projective force of his imagination that the Author, clearly a surrogate for Pirandello, is continually shown as being unable to discern the difference between his characters and the ‘real’ family which has inspired him. The ‘real’ Roman family the Author meets is then a kind of lacuna in his thinking and only has the identity that the Author/Pirandello has imposed upon them. That is, until the death of the ‘real’ Little Boy and the author’s later encounter at the Teatro Valle with the ‘real’ Mother. I consider this encounter the pivot of the whole work, as it is only this that propels the Author/Pirandello into seeing the tragic effect of his destructive actions on the lives of this family. It is also interesting that Pirandello chooses to do this with the Mother, as in the play she is the most passive of his characters. In Pirandello’s Preface to *Six Characters* he wrote:

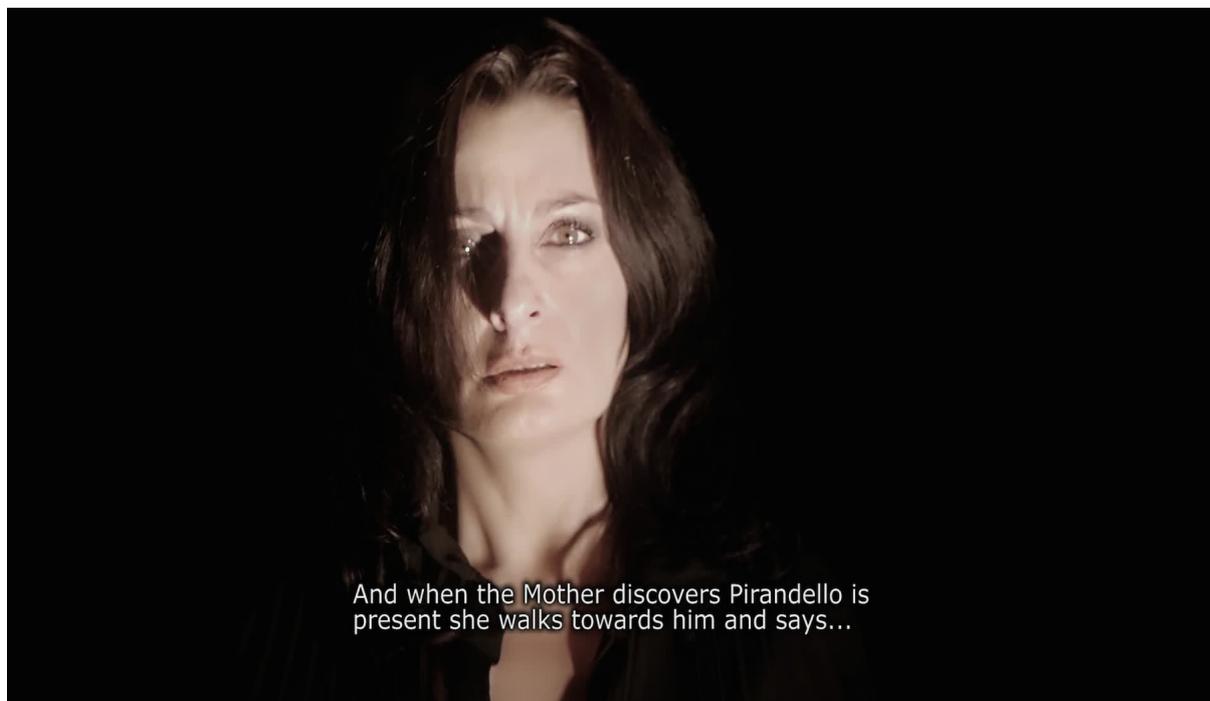
Non ha [...] coscienza d’essere personaggio [...]. Questo le torna perfettamente organico. Infatti la sua parte di Madre non comporta per sé stessa, nella sua ‘naturalità’, movimenti spirituali; ed ella non vive come spirito: vive in una continuità di sentimento che non ha mai soluzione, e perciò non può acquistare coscienza della sua vita, che è quanto dire del suo esser personaggio. (*Mn* II, 661)<sup>5</sup>

3 See L. Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author and Other Plays*, translated by M. Musa, new edition (London, Penguin, 1995) (hereafter *SC*), p. 12.

4 M. L. Quinn, ‘Relative Identity and Ideal Art: The Pirandello Conflict and Its Political Analogy’, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 3, ii (1998), 73–85 (p. 81).

5 ‘She doesn’t know she has a role. This makes her perfectly organic. Indeed her role of mother does not of itself, in its natural essence, embrace mental activity. And she does not exist as a mind. She

The conflation of the character of the Mother in *Six Characters* with essentialist ideas about femininity aside, this is, interestingly, in direct opposition to the construction of the 'real' Mother in *The Treatment for Six Characters*, who increasingly reaches self-possession through her moral outrage at the actions of the Author/Pirandello so that she eventually rushes at him in the theatre and confronts him angrily when she sees that he has used the tragic event of the death of her son, largely caused by the Author/Pirandello, as the subject for his art. The Mother's confrontation with the Author/Pirandello is the moment the Author at last sees the costs of his creative process more clearly. And he feels ashamed. As such this moment also enacts another reversal of sorts in the character of the Author/Pirandello. For all these reasons, the Author's, and the audience's, encounter with the character of the Mother needs to have moral, physical, and emotive force, and so I always intended to enact another reversal in the formal structure of my film by rupturing the distanced, documentary structure of the work up to that point by having the character of the Mother suddenly invade the work. This, then, is the one moment an actor enters, in fact invades, my film. As I have said, this is the pivotal moment of the film and as such it is meant to be a shock, but it also needed to be compelling and emotionally visceral. The Italian actress Simona Senzacqua, who plays the part of the Mother, acted this sequence superbly. Simona rushes into the theatre distraught and furious at what she has seen and, walking up to the Author/Pirandello, and speaking directly into the camera, utters the single line 'Will you



lives an endless continuum of feeling, and therefore she cannot acquire awareness of her life—that is, of her existence as a character': see *Naked Masks: Five Plays by Luigi Pirandello*, edited by E. Bentley (New York, Dutton, 1952), p. 370.

take my little girl too?’ I love the fact that, that having said this line twice, first in a whisper then yelling and tearful, she slowly recedes into the dark recesses of the theatre, like a phantom. It is also important that this is the one moment in the film when the camera becomes aligned with the point of view of the Author/Pirandello, so that the moral accusation spoken by the Mother is also forcefully directed towards the audience, which is at that point made to feel morally complicit, in that in watching Pirandello’s play, and my film, it is also seeing the tragic events of her life as entertainment. For all these reasons the physical presence of an actor was absolutely necessary.

I stated earlier that I felt there was in *The Treatment for Six Characters* an underlying class conflict and that I judge this to be a work exploring the ethics of the creative process. But here is also a political analogy. The Six Characters in the play have been sometimes interpreted as seeking the authority of a missing author, and their tragedy lies in how they are forever caught in the tension between being spiritual forms, as the ideal forms of art, and as temporal objects. It is interesting that again Pirandello’s *The Treatment for Six Characters* performs an inversion of this. Throughout most of *The Treatment for Six Characters*, the situation of the ‘real’ Roman family is cloaked under the Author’s/ Pirandello’s projective fantasy. The Author clearly views the family as doomed and directs his Secretary to avoid a relationship with the daughter, feeling that the family is destined for tragedy, an order nevertheless discreetly ignored by the young man. There is clearly a hierarchy in operation throughout the text, in that the rich and successful Author, and the quality of his work, are presented as having more significance, both socially and spiritually. This is until the point of the confrontation with the ‘real’ Mother, when the realities of the costs of this hierarchy upon the lives of a real family are brought home to the Author. The pure intellectual and imaginative force of the Author is from this point forever tainted. I do not have the space here to explore this fully but I am sure it would be possible to examine how this reversal in the perception of a leader as a powerful visionary figure could be viewed as analogous to Pirandello’s own shifting sense of his views on Fascism, which have been well documented, moving from a public declaration of the virtues of Fascism under Mussolini to his later distancing himself from the regime when he went to live in Berlin, which is where incidentally most of the writing for an earlier version of *The Treatment for Six Characters*, *Film-Nouvelle (The Scenario)*, took place.

It does look as if Pirandello’s plans to film the prologue to *Six Characters* would have finally proceeded, as promising negotiations at last began to take place with the Austrian theatre director Max Reinhardt and the German film-maker Josef von Sternberg. After several years of discussion with Pirandello in the years before his death in 1935, Reinhardt’s Studio production finally succeeded in 1939 and 1940 in enlisting Josef von Sternberg to make a film based on Pirandello’s text *The Treatment for Six Characters*. DaVinci Nichols and O’Keefe Bazzoni’s book

*Pirandello and Film* includes a copy of a letter sent to Pirandello's assistant after his death where Reinhardt and von Sternberg were still trying to proceed with the project and were rather despairing at its slow progress (pp. 131–35). They outlined about six to eight points of criticism about Pirandello's *Treatment*, suggesting revisions. These included advising a less harsh approach to the 'real' daughter of the family, who may or may not have been a prostitute, but they also encouraged a more visual, less repetitive approach. Many of these points appear to have been made to Pirandello before his death. He had conceded that the text was a 'work in progress'. Many of Reinhardt's and von Sternberg's revisions made it into my adaptation. I made the question of the girl's prostitution more ambiguous and this also served the wider project of making it clear that the projective imagination of the Author is feverishly at work throughout the film, in turn making the ethics of the Author/Pirandello's creative process starker, as it seems was Pirandello's intention. It was also clear that a number of repeated plot points and motifs were present in the work but that Pirandello may not have realized these could also be handled visually, and that the integrity of his project could also be maintained through textual, visual and sonic approaches.

Although I made a highly visual film, the soundtrack has been remarked upon as a strong feature of the work. In fact I worked as much on the soundtrack as on the visuals. Rather than artificially creating mist or fog, I was keen to document the sites of the film but also wanted to heighten a sense of fiction through sound, using sound in effect to help create a 'story-world'. This entailed a counter-intuitive combination of a documentary approach to the visuals with a use of sound that suggested that such locations have a fictive dimension. For instance, added to voice is location sound, by which I mean the sound of objects and straightforward cause and effect: if a car passes or someone walks into frame, or a flash of lightning is seen in the sky, you will also hear them. But added to this are layers of audio that lend atmosphere, including minimal music, plus layers of low-frequency sounds. I conceived of a sound map for the whole work in which I divided the film into two connecting but separate story-worlds. In the first are Pirandello's characters, present in the prologue to the work and thereafter signalled by the aggressive sound of stomping the floor, redolent of the call to the body the form of Greek chorus is known to use. Maintaining this sound throughout the film also allowed me to suggest that the characters perpetually hover just outside the story-world of Pirandello's film. The aggression of the stomp punctuates the wider work, giving it further rhythm and structure, but also signals the characters' sense of urgency, the desire to break through the world of the story in order to live. The second story-world is the world of the plot of Pirandello's *The Treatment for Six Characters*, and for this I conceived of a structure of interrelated sounds and music. Firstly, there are low-frequency sounds, which, with the right speakers, have a real physical force and are intended to suggest a hidden force or pressure trying to break through the façade

of the visuals. These low sounds are present from the beginning but disappear after the appearance of the character of the Mother, after which the dominant sounds change to much thinner, metallic and glass sounds, such as the glass violin, which are intended to reflect the more fragile, melancholy and fatalistic state of mind of the author as he realizes the damage he has created. I also make use of musical instruments throughout. I was clear that there should be no melody in the work; instead I wanted a more abstract use of music, fitting with the latent abstraction in the wider film, in for example my use of visual detail, weather and the overall relation of sound to image throughout the film. In fact I did not employ a musician but instead used single cello, violin or piano notes, plus one or two cello sequences that were more staccato in character. I then placed these single notes into the film-score one note at a time, looking to build rhythm and tension at key points.

Some sound sequences have already generated a strong reaction from the audience, such as the point where the Author/Pirandello begins to imagine overtly his fictional version of the Roman family for the first time. Rather than use visual superimposition of imagery onto an existing scene, as Pirandello apparently suggested, I show a large tree blowing in the wind on a dark night against the moon, against which is played a staccato cello together with Norman's evocative voice. In effect, handling representation of the plot in this way does not literally show the transformation, but instead I invite the audience to mirror the imaginative action of Pirandello's text so that, rather than seeing the transformation literally, the audience also imagines, as the Author/ Pirandello does, the fictional family emerging. Two simultaneous projective imaginations are at work at that moment, which is why I think audiences seem to like that point so much. Learning what to leave out is also crucial in the construction of any art-work, a point I believe Pirandello would have appreciated.

*Treatment for Six Characters* is part of a larger project. I originally went to Rome to draw Pirandello's film, which is happening, but will also make a final work which takes another evening as its subject: just after its Rome premiere, *Six Characters* went on to premiere in the United Kingdom, in a theatre in Holborn, London, in the hands of an avant-garde Russian director fresh from the Russian Revolution. This Russian director, Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, was also a colleague and friend of Konstantin Stanislavski. In fact he was one of the chief advocates of Stanislavski's ideas in the United Kingdom at that time; this was the invention of what would later become Method Acting, where the line between actor and character took on new implications. That Holborn theatre no longer exists, though the site does. Eventually I intend that *Treatment for Six Characters*, the drawn version, and that final Holborn work will form a kind of triptych.

Lastly, it turns out that there was only a brief period in time when it was possible to make *Treatment for Six Characters*. Even allowing for a combination of my own tenacity and luck, in August 2014 Teatro Valle Bene Comune was forced

out of the theatre by Rome's new mayor. Although there are plans to sustain the organization, it is true to say that its future now hangs in the balance. So, if I had gone to Rome earlier or was arriving now it would not have been possible to make this work.

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