

Getting a Life: *Cinematic Representations and Critical Refractions of the Chevalier de Saint-George*

 alternative francophone
pour une francophonie en mode mineur

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Abstract: *In this commentary, I briefly consider, for context, a number of short films focused on the Chevalier Saint-George and films in which the figure of the Chevalier has appeared, before focusing on the 2023 feature-length biopic, Chevalier, directed by Steven Williams. These reflections are focused on the continuities between period piece films, biographical films and adaptations. A term borrowed from French poetics, “ineffacement,” helps us to consider the film artist’s double duties to their own artistic license and personal engagements, on the one hand, and on their various epistemological and ethical obligations to the historical source material on the other. Chevalier does not succeed as a film in part because it fails to present viewers with the dilemmas of such balancing or to show much evidence of having even considered them. The film does show the renewal of interest in the figure of the Chevalier and promises more attempts to do justice to this inspiring historical character.*

Keywords: *Chevalier de Saint-George; cinematic biography; poethics; ineffacement; history*

Résumé : *Dans ce commentaire, je prends en considération quelques courts-métrages où figure le Chevalier de Saint-George ainsi que des exemples de sa présence discrète dans d’autres films avant de commenter plus longuement le long métrage hollywoodien Chevalier (Steven Williams, 2023). Quelles sont les continuités et les ruptures entre les films représentant des époques historiques, des films-biographies (biopics) et les adaptations d’œuvres littéraires ou biographiques ? Un terme emprunté à la*

poétique, « ineffacement », nous aide à cerner les devoirs, souvent doubles, de l'artiste cinématographique, des responsabilités à l'égard de la licence artistique et des engagements personnels d'une part et des obligations d'ordre épistémologique et éthique à l'égard des sources historiques d'autre part. *Chevalier* déçoit comme film en grande partie parce qu'il ne présente pas les tensions inhérentes à cette entreprise et efface précisément de telles considérations devant son public. Le film est un excellent exemple de l'intérêt renouvelé pour cette figure qui ne cesse d'inspirer et qui inspirera certes d'autres gestes cinématographiques à l'avenir.

Mots clés : *Chevalier de Saint-George; biographie filmée; poétique; ineffacement; histoire*

PRELIMINARIES

Responding to the critical comments of historians and film buffs who found too many historical inconsistencies and blatant counterfactuals in his recent *Napoleon*, the British director Ridley Scott lashed out at his detractors, blasting them with an imperious cannonade: “Get a life!” (Scharf). His remark really registered with me as I was thinking about the Chevalier de Saint-George in film. In particular, with reference to *Chevalier*, the big budget 2023 movie from Searchlight Pictures that was screened as part of the *Artists of the Caribbean Diaspora* event at the University of Alberta on February 14, 2024.

Scott’s admonition opens up three pertinent lines of reflection. One is broadly generic in character. One is related to memory and the believable. Another one is related to what I am going to call the artist’s paradoxical or double duties and their implications for the treatment of source material. I’m going to introduce these angles of approach preliminarily while keeping in mind the task at hand: to give an overview of the figure of the Chevalier in cinema and a critical appreciation of the recent feature film, *Chevalier*.

Then I am going to look in some detail, but, of course, far too briefly, at three moments of the 2023 film directed by the Canadian director Stephen Williams, narrative segments where these lines of reflection and their variable intersections and refractions come together, as reflected in the artistic choices that create representations of the historic Chevalier aimed at a contemporary audience.

We are interested in how the film deals with the past, how attention to that past can be either respectful or disrespectful, interested or disinterested, ignorant or informed, engaged or disengaged. I think we should be interested, too, and perhaps above all, in how cinematic representation of the past will be, almost necessarily, all of that at once—and more.

I am interested in the biographical-poetic act of *getting* a life—thank you, Ridley Scott—beyond the imperative mode, beyond the piqued cool of the globally acclaimed cineaste and his frustrated pronouncements.

I am interested in the cinematic-poietic act of getting, seizing, fixing, portraying, staging, figuring and re-figuring. And in how that impulse to make a work out of a life, to make art of another's life, interacts with things like research, respect for sources and for real people who once lived and their reputations, with "settings" in a very strong sense of that word, things like a sense of the alterity of the past, a whole warp and weave of cultural and political history in their always radical interpenetration, as we see in a particularly vivid way in these efforts to *get* the Chevalier who is at once athletic champion and celebrity musician, artist and soldier, courtier and "enchanter" (to borrow a nickname of François-René de Chateaubriand, the great inaugurator of the French romanticism towards which *Chevalier* may very well be pointing in its portrayal of a thwarted inheritance and of highly exacerbated alienation). The Chevalier is a falsely ennobled pariah, an upper-class second-class man, in a hauntingly productive paradox that becomes, at least in certain representations, a blind alley of aporetic but heroic and perhaps exemplary struggle. Joseph de Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-George is a significant actor, maybe not right at center stage but definitely *on* the stage of the massively complex 18th century *finissant*.

What is it to get the life of a historical figure who is both well-documented and obscure? What is it to get some nuanced portrayal of any complicated, exemplary life in a given historical moment? What is it to get that interweaving of a historical-biographical-narrative trajectory in a way that speaks truth to our own time without simply speaking our own truths? What is it to get all of that right, beautifully right? Spoiler alert: I do not think Stephen Williams' film does get the Chevalier's life beautifully right, and this is the case, it seems to me, for many reasons. But I want to qualify that generally negative assessment with a note of admiration for the tremendous creativity unleashed and coordinated in the making of this film. Big budgets are great for creators! For those of you who have not yet seen the movie or who wish to return to it, I highly recommend that you also watch the "Apple Extra Feature," "The Chevalier Note by Note." The level of talent and commitment in the whole production team is remarkable, exemplary. Attention to detail, historical accuracy in material culture, contextual fidelity in the costumes, sets, and a whole range of things from fencing to theatrical architecture to gesture and gait goes right along with a common dedication to depicting a neglected figure of the European, Afro-European and Euro-Afro-American past who incarnates in suggestive and meaningful ways the history of slavery, racism and discrimination and, as well, an explicitly enunciated revolutionary hope for the triumph of liberty and talent instantiated by the Chevalier's triumphs and failures. "No one can knock down an excellent Frenchman," advises the Chevalier's father at their last meeting. But the film, notwithstanding its numerous shortcomings, shows how imperfect a guarantee of success and happiness is excellence alone. In thinking about why this film might be considered a failure in important respects, perhaps even one that betrays its subject, in spite of that collective dedication and those admirable intentions, another reference to the Ridley Scott film might be useful. In an interview with Mayeul Aldebert, Lorris Chevalier, the historical consultant on Scott's *Napoleon* says a number of very cogent things, including:

Le conseiller historique recommande les pigments, les caméras font le mélange et lui [le réalisateur, Ridley Scott] tient le pinceau. Il voit le 7ème art comme de la peinture avec une hauteur de vue et une capacité de travail impressionnante.

Enfin, en tant que conseiller historique, il faut aussi accepter les détails qui ne sont pas historiques, car cela reste un film, une œuvre, et au même titre que l'on parle de licence poétique, on parle aussi de licence cinématographique. La première fois que j'ai rencontré Ridley Scott, il m'a dit qu'il avait viré sept conseillers historiques de *Gladiator*. Le conseiller historique trop académique, ce n'est pas sa position. (Aldebert)

As this young historian, I think that the margin for “cinematic license” is and should be considerable. But I wonder if the discretion of Lorris Chevalier and his deference to the painter-like genius and work ethic of a brilliant filmmaker does not hide a certain regret, a certain concern for sacrificed accuracy. I want us to keep Lorris Chevalier’s ideas of historical raw materials, metaphorical pigments on a metaphorical painter’s palette, and of an incontestable legitimate artistic license in mind in relation to what follows. In fact, I think those factors are, if anything, even more complicated and worthy of reflection and debate in the context of Williams’s *Chevalier* than they are in relation to Scott’s deeply flawed but nonetheless magisterial *Napoleon*.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIGURE OF LE CHEVALIER IN FILM

In keeping with the widespread ignorance of Bologne, his presence in film is quite minimal. What we do have in my necessarily non-exhaustive survey is all quite recent and one of the first things that would strike anyone looking at this limited sample is its generic multiplicity. Without getting too teleological, the variety of the disparate cinematic or televisual or more personal efforts made in the past twenty years or so suggests a development that tends toward a more complete and generically stable film like Williams’ *Chevalier*. In addition, perhaps *Chevalier*, with all of its flaws that I am obliged to dwell on here, itself points to something more adequate and admirable still to come.

I have found the trace of three films centered on the figure of the Chevalier produced before Steven Williams’ eponymous 2023 production: one of them, short and self-produced, quite intimate and indeed ultimately secret; and two others with more substantial budgets, wider distribution and multiple production and broadcast partners.

In chronological order and with a brief description, emphasizing generic questions, here they are: *Le Mozart Noir — Reviving a Legend*. Raymond Saint-Jean, Director. Producer Robert Neinstein. (CBC, TV-5, ARTE, BBC) 2003. Explicitly billing itself as a “performance documentary” but using actors and with a number of tableaux staged in 18th-century dress, it maintains and gives new visibility to the problematic nickname, *Le Mozart noir*. Its broadcast was associated with the release the same year of an album of the Chevalier’s music by the highly regarded Toronto baroque company, Tafelmusik. The status of the album in Tafelmusik’s output and their efforts to contextualize it are very interesting, and I will return to that shortly. Raymond Saint-Jean’s performance documentary also contains the single most moving shot in everything that I have looked at around the Chevalier. At the very end of the film, the African-American violinist Ashley Horne is asked to play his favorite passage from Saint-George and is so moved by the music and, I would speculate, the opportunity to share his admiration that he is left wordless, shifting emotionally on his stool, clearly choked up, after uttering the single word, “great.” It is an affecting moment showing the importance and the power of reconsidering and restoring this historical figure, one with so much inherent interest and symbolic pertinence for us.

The Breakthrough (15 minutes). Quinton Morris, Director, Executive Producer and Violinist. The Quinton Morris Project. 2015. This is a very interesting project, generically speaking, and otherwise. In it, Morris, currently a professor of violin at Seattle University, stages himself explicitly as a contemporary Chevalier as he embarks on a concert tour performing the work of Saint-George at the Louvre in Paris, among other places. (That underlying musical project is all biographical and career facts.) In *The Breakthrough*, he meets a contemporary Marie-Antoinette figure, and various complications ensue. I would love to see this whole short film! Let us call this, for now, cinematic “auto-fiction” in the guise of

restoring and paying homage to a half-forgotten historical alter ego. It also appears to be “auto-promotion” of the first order, with chutzpah to burn, and all the more intriguing for it.

Le Chevalier de Saint-George. (52 minutes). Dir. Claude Ribbe. Productions Ortheal et France 3. 2011. I attempted to obtain access to this film from the production company and from the director, but was unsuccessful. So, I am only able to base my comments on the descriptions on the Ortheal website and the few bits of trailer and interview available. The generic handle which the director (and main actor) Ribbe attaches to his made-for-television film is that of “docu-fiction.” It seems clear that Claude Ribbe, the biographer and great champion, over so many years, of the Chevalier, took pains to locate his film at the intersection of documentary accuracy and fictional inventiveness. Not for him, I would gather, the option of a rather more total license that a more generically stable film like Stephen Williams’ historical biopic may be deemed to confer.

INTERTEXT

Beyond these productions, there are also some very intriguing and enjoyable intertextual moments that could be examined further, among which I quickly note the following broadly relevant ones: Sophia Coppola’s *Marie-Antoinette*: French *Wikipédia* entry compactly tells us that, “Certains auteurs le disent maître de musique, professeur de clavecin de la reine comme on le voit dans le film de Sofia Coppola *Marie-Antoinette*, du prénom de la reine.”

We could say that a movie like Coppola’s, along with a *Netflix* series like *Bridgerton*, make a film like Stephen Williams’ *Chevalier* possible and perhaps even that there are *passages ménagés*, bridges and secret passages, between and amongst such stylish, hip re-imagining of the past. For better and for worse. A film about an 18th-century musician could hardly have a soundtrack by French indie pop band Phoenix, but I cannot help imagining such hybridization. The real musical synthesis achieved on the soundtrack by Michael Abels (Music producer and arranger) and Kris Bowers (Score composer) in *Chevalier* is quite wonderful too.

Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* may seem an unlikely point of contact, notwithstanding its focus on slavery and its liberation/revenge plot. Claude Ribbe refers to a number of “*allusions amicales*” made to his own 2011 film by the influential American director in *Django* (see Ortheal website). These four or five friendly allusions range from the color of the coat and the flourish with which a violinist finishes off an air in Tarantino’s film to a specific kind of equestrian pirouette that the two films have in common.

In Stephen Williams’ *Chevalier* there is also a moment of overt cinematic and literary intertext that might almost go unnoticed. At one point, Joseph is in bed with his paramour, Marie-Joséphine de Montalembert, and they have a significant conversation while she is stretched out naked on her front with a strategically placed sheet across her backside. The Chevalier is busy scribbling away, with some of his writing materials scattered across the bed and her lower body.

This is not quite but very nearly a direct visual quote from Stephen Frears’ 1988 cinematic adaptation of Christopher Hampton’s theatrical adaptation of the 18th-century novel *Dangerous Liaisons*. While it does not carry anything like the same erotic charge or dark malicious edge as the original scene (featuring the actors John Malkovich and Uma Thurmann), it does occur at a crucial point in the 2023 film’s development when the two lovers are centrally concerned with the upcoming production of the

Chevalier's first opera, *Ernestine*, the libretto of which was written by... none other than Choderlos de Laclos, author of the original novel *Liaisons dangereuses*.

This is, I take it, an isolated example of such meta-referentiality in Williams's film. Intertextuality is not a central part of the overall *langage* of this film, nor is it a signature element of the filmmaker's style in his other films, given their generic situatedness¹ but this moment is, at the very least, clever and playful and potentially is or could have been the tip of a much larger and more satisfying iceberg.

Unfortunately, and I will say more about this later because I believe it constitutes a decisive weakness of the recent film, in contrast with the multilayered awareness and subtle exploitation of intertextual possibilities that this scene realizes and seems to promise, most of the other cultural references made to 18th-century figures (and they skew heavily toward musical ones) seem as though they were cut and pasted from works of cultural history and then just thrown into a blender or some kind of random selector. Dare I say, Chat GPT could do better.

Circling back to the issue of genres—and noticing things like the reference to *Dangerous Liaisons* reinforced this for me—it seems clear that to properly understand the status and interpretive horizon of the most recent and largest scale Chevalier film, some intuitively obvious but difficult to define continuities between historical epics, biopics, and literary adaptations need to be explored.² I will be emphasizing two points.

First of all, there is just a presumption in adaptation theory that historical films are inherently adaptive in character. The most relevant aspect of this in the present context is summarized by Defne Ersin Tutan in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* in an entry entitled “Adaptation and History,” where she argues that “all historical representations are radically adaptive and that the ways in which these alternative representations are conceived and perceived tell us more about the present than about the past they refer to” (577). Much about *Chevalier* and its reception abundantly demonstrates this point and some of it will emerge in what follows.

A second useful insight into these connections and continuities is a strong sense that within a properly framed account of an adaptive communicational act, like a historical film, or perhaps even a biopic in general, there is or should be an ethical obligation to respect what adaptation scholar Anne Furlong calls “the moral economy of the source.”³ When the source is the life of a relatively distant historical figure and the various contemporaneous and historical accounts of that life, along with subsequent specialist and

¹ Williams' filmography, available on IMDb and Wikipedia, delineates the body of work of a successful practitioner of commercial genre films and television. From the global phenomenon *Lost* to the adaptation of the Moore and Gibbons graphic novel, *The Watchmen*, he has distinguished himself principally as a television producer and director, with one previous feature film, directed when he still made Canada his base. A mini-documentary on IMDb, “Where Chevalier Meets Watchmen through Costuming, History and Justice” draws some of the threads of his career together very briefly, but tells us relatively little about his sensibility and nothing about his artistic vision.

² I will not try to summarize all of this thinking which is both fundamental and a bit of a digression, but it culminated (we're into a “Making Of” of this paper now, yet another genre!) in an email exchange with Anne Furlong of the University of Prince Edward Island English Department, a true scholar of adaptation theory, author of *Adaptation Audience and Interpretation The Adaptor as Communicator* (Palgrave McMillan 2025). She was very patient with my attempts to articulate the possible continuities and analogies between history films, biographies/biopics and literary adaptations. I will condense the help she gave me on this heading in two points. Whatever may seem overly simple in this account is due to my over-condensation or poor understanding of things, not to her clear and nuanced emails.

³ See previous note.

generalist accounts and appreciations of that figure's body of artistic work, when there have been novelizations and re-imaginings of his life that have interacted with our sense of the biographical facts, and when, additionally, we must take at least some account of the many events of lasting historical import in which that person participated, *de près ou de loin*, the scale of the difficulties becomes apparent, and the potential for failures of various kinds can only be seen as very high.

What might be called empirically verifiable "bloopers" and, by contrast, less obvious but more egregious over-determinations of the economy of the source material in the name of commercial imperatives, ideological agendas or artistic visions or some combination, represent two poles of potential misjudgments, misrepresentation, and a source of more or less serious error.

Napoleon's troops firing cannon at the Great Pyramid in Ridley Scott's film might fall into the first category of historical bloopers. In contrast, some of the liberties taken by Williams and his writing and production team with respect to the documented and undocumented aspects of the lives of his "characters" may well fall into the second category of disrespect for the moral economies of the source material.

EFFACEMENT AND INEFFACEMENT

At the core of *getting* the Chevalier lies the difficulty of his effacement and erasure from the historical and cultural record and of overcoming that effacement. I was struck by the recurrence of this kind of language in so much of the criticism, journalism and scholarship— "*Why has this person been erased?*" as the title of a review article put it in *The Guardian*. Two other texts will help bring this out more fully, but the language of erasure and effacement is quite generalized in discussions of le Chevalier and of the works he has inspired.⁴

One of these was released as a formal disclaimer by the aforementioned Toronto baroque orchestra, Tafelmusik.

Disclaimer

In 2003, Tafelmusik recorded an album devoted to the music of Joseph Bologne, titled "Le Mozart Noir." A subsequent re-release of the same album, in 2016, featured abstracted, stylized artwork which obscured and erased Bologne's face.

We recognize that by using the title "Le Mozart Noir," and by using artwork which depicts the composer with an abstracted blank face, we have contributed to and facilitated the erasure of Joseph Bologne and his legacy. We regret, and apologize for, these actions.

With the goal of properly centering Bologne's achievements, our digital audio release has been reissued under a new title, *The Music of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges*. Newly commissioned album artwork by Toronto painter Gordon Shadrach and an essay by American conductor and Bologne scholar Marlon Daniel accompany the re-release, in order to properly depict Bologne." (Tafelmusik website)

(And we know that the film "Le Mozart Noir—Reviving a Legend" was the performance-documentary that coincided with the recording project.)

⁴ Including an interview with Stephen Williams where the filmmaker speaks briefly but urgently about the importance of undoing the effacement of "figures like Chevalier who have been erased from our collective consciousness." ("Where 'Chevalier' Meets Watchmen through Costuming, History and Justice.")

The other acutely resonant text for us is a 2020 article/opinion piece by composition professor Marcos Bolzer, published in the *New Yorker*, a text that coincided with the announcement of a forthcoming Hollywood studio biopic about Saint-George: “When the announcement was made, headlines resurrected yet another moniker for Boulogne: “Black Mozart.” Presumably intended as a compliment, this erasure of Boulogne’s name not only subjugates him to an arbitrary white standard, but also diminishes his truly unique place in Western classical music history.” (Bolzer)

Building on a similar insight, the most thorough academic consideration of how the term “Black Mozart” contributes to effacing the man and the *oeuvre* has been offered by Julian A. Ledford in his article, “Joseph Bologne, the Chevalier de Saint-George and the Problem with Black Mozart.” He passes the “moniker” under various theoretical lenses, like Fanon, Sartre, Ellingson and others. It is very interesting that, in the end, he allows that the “Black Mozart” moniker may have served a real purpose in the “revival” (also an interesting word) of Saint-George but that now it is time to affirm absolutely the need of just saying his name, of letting him be in his geographical, cultural and biracial singularity, in his individuality.⁵ I will not recapitulate all of Ledford’s patient work but recommend the text to those interested in going deeper on these issues.

I want to add an element borrowed from French poetics to the theoretical and practical debates around the erasure or effacement of the name and legacy of Joseph Bologne, le Chevalier de Saint-George. *Ineffacement* is a neologism that I borrow from the poet-philosopher Michel Deguy (1930–2022) and one that I have had occasion to write about on its own terms or to use in other work since the mid-1990s. I will offer yet another contextually oriented paraphrase of the term here, because it is a useful and adaptable concept.⁶ (I recall an Anglophone commentator translating *ineffacement* as “de-erasure” which is helpful in its blunt complexity but I prefer a simpler direct transport into English of this easily graspable term.)

Deguy is the coiner of a number of suggestive and theoretically grounded terms such as “poethics” (which does not work quite as well in English because, of course, it is a play on two homophones in French—*poétique* and *po-éthique*) or “geopoetics.” Always operating in the spirit of a contemporary *Défense et illustration* of the French language and indeed employing quite consciously the methods advocated by La Pleiade, modernizing and radicalizing them, Deguy came to the inspired double negation “in-effacement” in the 1990s, substantially in the context of writing about Claude Lanzmann’s film, *Shoah*.

For Deguy, it is a matter of grasping what in, and with, the passage of time has become unbelievable; not, of course, in the strongest sense of negation or denialism, but simply unbelief, disbelief relative to an event of such enormity that contemporaries have increasing difficulties in grasping it and in representing it to themselves. The work of art is the only way to “inefface”, to operate a deeply inventive and deeply respectful refiguring of events, and beyond that of mytheme, theologeme, of a whole battery of literal and

⁵ This brief quotation will have to suffice here to show both the work of *ineffacement* pursued by Ledford with respect to the composer and his music and the many potent analogies with the cinematic treatment of the Chevalier and its attendant pitfalls: “It is my opinion, however, that despite the original intent behind the use of the term Black Mozart, its continued use undoes Saint-George’s historicity, subsumes the musical output and lived experiences of the Chevalier into the Eurocentric gaze, and thus perpetuates an epistemology and ontology of Blackness that race theorists of old and of today have tried to undo.” (Ledford 61). The term “counterfinalities” (or unintended consequences) comes to mind.

⁶ For more on this more or less permanent interest and inspiration, see: C. Elson (“Ineffacer avec Michel Deguy”; “Les Reliques”).

figural structurings of human existence, “the figurativity of [our] existence,” increasingly menaced by the interconnected factors of growing forgetfulness, deculturation, technologization, ecocide.

Michel Deguy, to the best of my knowledge, never deployed his neologism relative to individual biographies, individual lives, but I think the analogical extensions are worth bringing forward here, as a helpful tool. The word and the general logic of its use can help grasp something like a poethics of historical film.

Part of what I find seriously inadequate about the ambitious 2023 *Chevalier* is a failure to dwell in the kind of worried amazement captured by “ineffacement.” Deguy will also speak *pace* Coleridge of “a willing suspension of belief” to get at the same kind of affective-pensive dilemma, the failure to dwell in some kind of wondering *disbelief*, even in the casual conversational sense— “That’s Unbelievable!”

The Chevalier’s trajectory probably always was, and has definitely become properly unbelievable with the passing of time. To quote Ashley Horne of the Black Music Repertory Ensemble and the Centre for Black Music Research (*Le Mozart noir*, 1’14”): “Most people are astonished that there’s a composer, who happens to be black, during the time of Mozart. People are surprised, they’re... ‘that can’t possibly be.’” There is a lot in that remark that could be unpacked.

In the filmmaking team’s decision to simply assert and double down on the evident moral-political failings of the period, in the film’s self-gratulatory tone with respect to historical systems, in its decision to present the Chevalier within the frame of exaggerated psychological, political and ethnocultural clichés, rather than dwelling on the potentially deeper mysteries of the “*devenu-incroyable*” of this extraordinary life—becoming unbelievable in the several senses that present themselves here, is regrettable.

It is unbelievable that someone like Bologne could succeed so substantially and variously under the circumstances of slavery and the *Code noir*, unbelievable, too, the social space that he created for himself through his determination and excellence, and unbelievable, the degree of admiration, recognition and success that he was afforded, unbelievable that such a substantial part of his body of work still stands, in spite of both malevolent and benevolent neglect and general ignorance, unbelievable that we are still working on sorting out his place in cultural history, still working out many of the contradictions and paradoxes within our world that he incarnates as a kind of exemplary figure of what might have been and what might be.

We are still working out the meaning and value of his extraordinary life as exemplary. The film has a place, but an ultimately disappointing one, in my reading, in this revival and reassessment and, more seriously, its shortcomings may even tend to undermine possibilities of further study and future re-imaginings and translations-forward of the Chevalier for other contemporaries to come.⁷ To use the

⁷ At the moment of editing this symposium text for publication I discovered a just-published article by George Mason University scholar Christy Pichichero that is fundamentally aligned with my own criticisms of the film and my concerns about its impacts. Indeed, in relation to what I call here the possible undermining of future generations ever really “getting” the Chevalier, her article, speaking from expert scholarship in the period and long-term engagement with these issues of historical representation, even offers itself as an explicitly “restorative” gesture relative to possible negative effects of the Searchlight Pictures film. Professor Pichichero’s competencies and purposes are usefully complimentary, I take it, to what I have attempted to offer here and I hope the reverse is true. See “Images and Imaginaries of Black Atlantic History; *Chevalier* and Joseph Bologne the Chevalier de Saint-George.” Pichichero’s

imperative form of Michel Deguy's neologism: *ineffaçons!!* Which I might translate here as "let's keep working on getting this life into a work!"

Let us look now at the three moments I mentioned from the 2023 film in the light of these considerations.

THREE MOMENTS (THE RAP BATTLE; COMPETITION AND PETITION; INFANTICIDE)

THE RAP BATTLE (0:0'1"-7'24")

From the haunting violin in the opening darkness beneath the credits right up to the deathless Mozartean words, "*Who the Fuck is he?*" (7'24"), the film opens and unfolds with a long "rap battle" to use the expression employed by director Stephen Williams himself ("Note by Note," 11'20"). Before seeing that interview material, I was looking for something catchy to call the opening sequence, something along the lines of a dance-off, something like a bow-off, a fiddle-off, a saw-off? Rap battle it is.

We see a preening Mozart finishing up a concert before a public of beautifully styled Parisians seated in a ravishing baro(q)coco hall and, basking in the adulation, the composer asks his audience for requests. A "dark stranger" whose violin is "in the shop" imposes his voice over the other concertgoers and imposes himself on Mozart with a request to join him in the playing of the latter's Concerto no. 4.

Mozart's arrogance, condescension and casual racism quickly turn to a panicky envy—not only does the anonymous stranger know the concerto by heart, not only is he able to complement the composer's own parts with evident technical mastery and remarkable expressive intensity, but the elegant, charismatic guest is also capable of interjecting some wild, unexpected improvisational passages that, as at least one critic, Heather Macdonald, has noted, depend on musical developments well downstream of the 1770s and 80s that are being depicted here.

In a 1990 scholarly article, the same Gabriel Banat who was interviewed for Tafelmusik's film sets up the context for the Mozart-Bologne comparison, treated with such metaphorical enthusiasm in *Chevalier*, by emphasizing Joseph Bologne's participation in a general turn in French music toward *symphonies concertantes* and, in relation to that, emphasizing how Bologne pursues the *mise-en-scène* of two violinists in an innovative manner that the biographer describes as follows: "With two violin soloists, a comparison with a duel could be made" (178-79). Via this musicological commentary, the stage is clearly set for a move like Williams' decision to open with a "rap battle."

After outlining a number of possible points of contact between Mozart and Saint-George (including their likely presence at the private theater of Madame de Montesson and the Duc d'Orléans, possibly even guests under the same, very large, roof; Mozart's unquenchable thirst for patronage at home and abroad; and his gracious deployment of his influence in Paris on behalf of Austrian job-seekers), Banat concludes as follows on the question of influence: "The possibility of some contact between the two musicians is further suggested by a passage from Mozart's *Symphonie concertante* in E-flat major K.364," (Banat

emphasis on the representation of Nanon, the Chevalier's mother is welcome; it is an aspect of the film that I simply could not address given my necessary focus on the Chevalier himself here.

189), and the violinist-musicologist-biographer goes on to convincingly map two musical quotations against one another.⁸

To give the benefit of the doubt to the film's reimagining and reframing of contact, influence and subsequent historical reputation, it can be said that the cinematography, if not the acting and writing, does tend to earn its points—dwelling, and quite beautifully so in spite of the anachronistic elements, on the radical range and bow work, which are precisely the features of Saint-George's music and compositional approach that Banat emphasizes in his article as being the Chevalier's likely or at least plausibly demonstrable influence on Mozart.

I would not go so far as Heather MacDonald, in an intensely negative if spirited and erudite review of the film, "Minor in a Major Key," as to say that *Chevalier* goes from representing Bologne as the "Black Mozart" to presenting Mozart instead as the "White Chevalier." I do not think the actual movie as a piece of filmmaking, in its analyzable montage and composition, quite makes its point that way.

But MacDonald's is a useful remark rhetorically, and citing it allows me to temper it and get at what I want to say by suggesting in less polemical and more academic language that the deconstruction of the opposition Mozart/Black Mozart is inconclusive or unresolved, given its excessive emphasis on and dependence upon a kind of comeuppance and "fall" of Mozart and an exaltation and "rise" of Saint-George.

What would *getting* the life more adequately than this simplistic overturning of a hierarchy entail? Perhaps some kind of less striking or playful rap battle, duel, bow-off, whatever we might call it. Perhaps even a quieter and less "stagey" development that could get at both the historic dependency of the two terms of the opposition, and maybe even the richer, more suggestive and open biographical dimension (largely unknowable, but ever so suggestive) of possible mutual admiration, rivalry, influence.

For one thing, it seems to me that no contemporary accounts of the personalities of these musicians or their possible Parisian context give any reason to support such a brash and mutually hostile confrontation. Why a rap battle rather than a complex, distant or close, admiring or rivalrous friendship? Why not show even one interesting private encounter? Is wanting something more nuanced ultimately pointless or empty polemical?

One of the champions of Bologne (not necessarily of the film), Marcus Bolzer, said, in an interview with *The Guardian's* David Smith: "Mozart is a tremendous composer. I adore Mozart's music so my reaction to Mozart as an artist and as an influence in history remains intact. He is a great figure. Saying that Bologne is a great figure does not mean that Mozart wasn't. It only means that we should not talk about this artist as the shadow of this other one. It's not an either/or. It's an and/and."

That is helpful in seeing what could be, but perhaps itself still an insufficient treatment of the complex relation or putative opposition.

Other defenders of the film itself might argue that the rest of the movie, after the opening bow-off, is devoted to the working out of the implications of such an overturning of the expected, received hierarchy.

⁸ For more on this point, see Guillaume Tardif's article in this special issue.

This is put somewhat trivially but representatively by one of the several film critics who are left convinced by the movie:

It is the moment that Amadeus finally knows how Salieri felt. Strutting with arrogance, Mozart is challenged to a violin duel and upstaged by a precocious rival. His name? Joseph Bologne, AKA the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, AKA young, gifted and Black. Whether this showdown ever took place is doubtful, but it makes for a playful opening to Chevalier, a new film based on the life of the long-overlooked classical composer who was also a champion fencer... (Smith). To make his point about the film's representation of rivalry, David Smith points to another intertextual node here, already referenced above, with the allusion to Salieri inevitably conjuring up Milos Forman's multi-Oscar-and-other-prize-winning 1984 movie *Amadeus*.

I just do not see how the rap battle does anything other than maintain the Chevalier in a kind of dependency relative to Mozart, even *disrespecting* his actual 18th-century music by making his radical and compelling improvisations so dependent on more modern classical music and jazz (the question of the possible role of Creole and Caribbean folk music is a difficult one here, one that at least some commentators like Barry Herz of the *Globe and Mail* feel the film has also distorted or overplayed); and indeed, Joseph's subsequent failures may be read as confirmation of the risks of leaning too hard on a simplistically reordered duality. The filmmakers' hubris becomes the doomed overreach of its subject.

COMPETITION AND PETITION (1:03'10"—1:24'5")

From the first mention of the growing staleness of the Paris Opera, in a scene where the Chevalier and Marie-Antoinette are seen as intimate familiars attending a performance in a private box and criticizing both the singers and the orchestra leader *sotto voce*, the ambition of Saint-George to lead this most prestigious of companies becomes the principal plot driver. Reviewers and critics who have rightly emphasized the centrality in the film of the love affair with Marie-Joséphine de Comarieu de Montalembert may have missed the embeddedness of that love affair within the broader cultural and political power struggles, something that itself may be revealing of some of the limits of genre cinema and its critics. The appetite for influence, sustained and generous patronage, scope for expression and innovation, unchallenged cultural power are all condensed over the course of this sequence.

In the course of this central development, we are taken through the composition of an opera (an actual work from Bologne's oeuvre, *Ernestine*, as mentioned above) and the preparations for its production. A competition has been decreed by Marie-Antoinette for the next directorship of the Opera, and we see the feverish preparations to present a performance worthy of the prize. In the course of his casting, Bologne falls for a stunning singer, the married Marie Joséphine, Marquise de Montalambert. Their irresistible attraction, undeniable affinities and inevitable love affair dovetail with the grand success of Bologne's operatic work and the cruel injustice of the loss of the position, notwithstanding that triumph, to the other contestant, Christoph Willibald Gluck.

Here, as elsewhere, I am conscious that I need to bear in mind the risks of nit-picking, with Ridley Scott's blast still ringing in my ears. I do not want to turn into *that guy* (the kind of guy who writes "*Chevalier True Story: Seven Biggest Changes to the Real Violinist's Life*," a piece written by *that kind of gal*, Mae Abuldaki, and, in all seriousness, a very helpful list, if itself incorrect in certain respects.) However, bearing in mind the tension between cinematic license and respect for the moral economy of sources that

structures my whole intervention here, I will compactly present some of the most significant excesses, distortions and inventions.

Firstly, the liaison with Marie-Joséphine is significantly distorted. She was no singer, as she is depicted in the film, but a writer of novels. She did not participate in this endeavour as an artist and could not therefore have played the part of an equal in a thwarted passion project to seize control of the Opera, portrayed by Williams as a bold, if simplistic, struggle against the establishment in the name of gender and racial liberty and autonomy. The real Marie-Joséphine was almost certainly one in a series of Saint-George's "meaningful relationships," evoked discreetly by a contemporary chronicler.⁹ The Hollywood soulmate trope here is advanced based on flimsy or no evidence. This will be pushed even further in relation to the dramatic coda to the failure of the Chevalier's opera plan.

Secondly, there was no competition as such. There was a proposal made by Bologne to take on the Opera with the backing of well-heeled investors. There may have been other proposals. The reasons for the King's ultimate rejection of Bologne's proposal appear to be at least twofold, first and foremost the racist petition generated by two of the most admired and powerful divas and a prominent dancer of the Académie, and secondly, bound up with that, a fear that the King would lose control of this central cultural institution, something that the petition may or may not have conveniently come to help him avoid.¹⁰

The introduction of the Austrian, Christoph Gluck, here as the second contestant in the non-existent competition is particularly egregious. That there was a kind of rich and competitive interaction between individuals and "national" styles and that this overlapped and was driven by rivalries amongst the various thrones of Europe in those years is undeniable and a banality. But to turn this into a head-to-head competition between a young, funky French innovator and an ageing Teutonic stick in the musical mud, as it is presented, is an unjustified, unnecessary and unsustainable reduction. As previously suggested, it is as though the writing team had read a few articles like "Marie-Antoinette *et la musique*: Habsburg Influence on French Operatic Culture" by Julia Doe and simply generated a word cloud to find yet another Germanic nemesis for the ostensibly hip and future-oriented Saint-George, *révolutionnaire sans le savoir* (at least for the moment).

⁹ de la Boëssière, fils. *Mémoires*, cited in de la Laurencie and Martens. The son of le Chevalier's fencing master provided an early firsthand account of the life of the Chevalier.

¹⁰ The following quotation from Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* gets at both the *placet* and the ultimate decision of the King to himself sponsor the Académie royale de Musique (the Paris Opera): "Le gouvernement de l'Académie royale de Musique s'est vu menacé de grandes révolutions. M. de Malesherbes et la ville de Paris ayant fortement désiré d'être débarrassés d'une province si bruyante et si difficile à conduire, il s'est présenté plusieurs compagnies qui en ont demandé la régie. Un jeune Américain, connu sous le nom du chevalier de Saint-Georges, qui réunit aux moeurs les plus douces une adresse incroyable pour tous les exercices du corps et de très-grands talens pour la musique, était du nombre des chefs d'une de ces compagnies. Mesdemoiselles Arnould, Guimard, Rosalie et autres n'en ont pas été plus tôt informées, qu'elles ont adressé un *placet* à la reine pour représenter à Sa Majesté que leur honneur et la délicatesse de leur conscience ne leur permettraient jamais d'être soumises aux ordres d'un mulâtre. Une considération si importante a fait toute l'impression qu'elle devait faire; mais, après beaucoup de projets et de discussions de ce genre, cette grande question vient d'être décidée enfin par la bonté du roi, qui a bien voulu se charger de faire régir l'Opéra pour son propre compte par MM. les intendants et trésoriers de ses Menus-Plaisirs. Si la recette n'égalait point la dépense, Sa Majesté y suppléera; si elle produit quelque bénéfice, il sera partagé entre les acteurs qui auront le mieux mérité du public." (Grimm)

This statement from the film's harshest critic seems about right to me: "Far from being 'stale,' as Bologne suggests in the movie, Gluck's works were seen as revolutionary, at once simplifying the ornate formal elements of Italian court opera, known as '*opera seria*,' and deepening the expressive content of the music." (MacDonald)

And, thirdly, the *placet* itself, the petition from the divas and the dancer, a grotesque, recorded document, one revealing a widely shared, subjacent, reflexive, and all too easily instrumentalized racism, actually gets altered, in the wisdom of the filmmaking team. *Chevalier*'s version of the petition adds a further sentence about the "subhuman" character of Bologne.¹¹ What is said about him in the documented petition as a "mulâtre," and the divas' unwillingness to take direction from him ("*leur honneur et la délicatesse de leur conscience ne leur permettraient jamais d'être soumises aux ordres d'un mulâtre...*") are the exact words) might well be considered harsh enough and to our contemporary ears shocking enough to make the point, but the heavily binary-dependent and conflict-driven vision at the heart of this film dictates here, as elsewhere, that the available historical evidence must be ratcheted up a notch to the detriment of even its most valid points. This is one of the moments when the *Los Angeles Times* critic Katie Walsh's assessment that the "tawdriness" and "shallowness" of the film detract decisively from the truly radical and inspiring possibilities of its subject seems most apt.¹²

INFANTICIDE (1:15'51"-1:22'10")

As things come apart on the level of his musical and institutional ambitions, the Chevalier is depicted in the film as having to confront a further injustice and tragic disappointment. This time the liberties taken with the source material are, if anything, even more dubious than in the framing narrative of the competition itself.

The violinist, musicologist and Chevalier biographer Gabriel Banat speaks in the Tafelmusik performance documentary with complete confidence of the infanticide by negligence of a baby born of the liaison between Marie-Joséphine de Montalembert and Joseph Bologne (*Mozart Noir* 25'39"-26'58"). He locates the source for this assertion in the diaries of two "neighbors" of the de Montalemberts, diaries which

¹¹ "He belongs to a subhuman race and such a man should not be allowed the honour of holding the highest musical position in France. We implore our Queen to reverse the decision." (1: 03' 10") is my transcription of the invented part of the petition, as read in the film. The *placet* was addressed to the Queen in order that she seek to influence the King, but she was not the arbiter of the competition and indeed the "international competition" showcased in the film was in fact an arbitration not of musical works but of what we might call business proposals for the management of the company.

¹² Christy Pichichero's above-mentioned article in the online journal *Imaginaires (Films, Fictions, and Other Representations of French-Speaking Worlds)* further brings out the fact that the film, careless and exaggerated with respect to the available sources on the Opera petition episode, also relativizes, effectively diminishing, the evident anti-black racism clearly experienced by the Chevalier by making it a direct consequence of sexual jealousy in the exacerbated erotic rivalries of the court setting: "The movie *Chevalier* dramatizes the episode but reduces its veracity and its potency. Instead of a manifestation of structural racism, the movie plot frames it as an episode of trivial romance. The film's version has Saint-George spurn Marie-Madeleine Guimard's sexual advances, which makes her want to destroy him (consider, too, the misogynistic image here of the dancer. White female characters are also depicted in objectionable ways in *Chevalier*). In the end, Saint-George's downfall is chalked up to the liabilities of his own sexiness and romantic decision-making, rather than to white supremacy and anti-Black racism." (Pichichero). One might wish to explore further and take more seriously the notion of "trivial romance" in this film but the main point here seems to me well founded.

Banat characterizes as “gossip” all the while affirming their veracity: “*the diaries mention the fact,*” he says, *the fact* of the birth of the child and its subsequent willful and fatal neglect by an outraged, cuckolded Montalembert.

Claude Ribbe, for his part, evokes the same rumor far more precariously, indicating only a single source for it, one which he also qualifies as gossip, *cancans*, emphasizing, perhaps for literary-rhetorical reasons, the literal blindness of the “witness” and staying well away from a language of *facts*.¹³ He identifies and accurately quotes the source in his biography, *Le Chevalier de Saint-George*:

L’anecdote est rapportée par la mauvaise langue du quartier de Popincourt, Claude-Rigobert Lefebvre de Beauvray, un ancien avocat. Devenu aveugle, la couleur de peau des gens ne l’intéresse plus guère. Mais, dans le cas d’espèce, il a entendu dire que le marquis ne trouvait pas que cet enfant ressemblait beaucoup aux Montalembert. Beauvray juge utile de consigner ces cancans dans son journal du mois de septembre 1785 : « Il est question, écrit le retraité, d’une intrigue galante de Madame la marquise de Montalembert, demeurant toujours avec Monsieur le marquis, son époux, rue de La Roquette, faubourg Saint-Antoine, intrigue plus ou moins secrète que la médisance ou la calomnie impute à cette jeune dame avec le célèbre virtuose Monsieur de Saint-George, riche créole américain. L’on parle même d’un enfant né de ce commerce illégitime, mort quelque temps après sa naissance d’une maladie dont on aurait pu mais dont on ne se souciait point de le guérir. Conformément sans doute aux vues du père putatif qui profita de cette circonstance pour se défaire sans éclat d’un fils qu’il avait tout lieu de croire n’être pas le sien. » (Ribbe)

Even in its own terms the cited passage from Lefebvre de Beauvray is clear as to its third-hand character, clear to characterize its own original (second-hand) source as “médisance ou calomnie” and it is literally, textually founded upon the formula “l’on parle même de” where the language is that of escalatory reports, of unattributed and scandalous rumor, being reported without any affirmation, confirmation or really any judgment at all brought forward by the author, the recorder and spreader of the gossip, himself.

We are a long way here from the film’s lapidary statement, in the words of Marie-Joséphine’s cousin, the producer of Bologne’s opera: “He [Montalembert] killed him [the baby].” This moment becomes a vital turning point in the psychological and political logic of the film, yet it is founded on nothing verifiable.

The words of Banat in the 2003 “performance documentary” could almost be Directors’ Notes for the Williams film twenty years later: “*He would have had the same hope for this baby as his father had for him.*” This pure speculation is the psychological fulcrum on which the character of the Chevalier and his engagement with world-historical systems and movements get shifted. It is a lot of work to be done on the basis of a third-hand rumor. And even on its own terms it is not enough to do that work in the film.

From rumor, conditionally presented by a notorious rumor monger, to a retroactive assertion of infanticide is quite a leap, and it is entirely in keeping with other choices made in the representation of Montalembert who is portrayed throughout the film as a kind of mega-royalist-nationalist, an incarnation of chauvinism and racism, concerned less with the building of innovative fortifications for his king and dabbling in theater in his downtime, as the recorded facts of his career would suggest, rather than with an obsessive preoccupation with the enemy within.

¹³ Interestingly, Julian A. Ledford cites Ribbe’s *Mémoires du Chevalier Saint-George, roman* as his source for the affirmation of the loss of the lover and the murder of the child. It would appear that Ribbe’s scrupulousness about genre designations (including, no doubt, that of *docu-fiction* for the telefilm he produced and directed for France 3) has been lost on some of his readers.

Montalembert's representation, in particular his perverse and violent chauvinism, points to a whole zone of the intentions of the film, i.e., the Americanization of the Chevalier, of the period. There is an instrumentalization of real historical psychologies and real historical existential dilemmas in the service of a *polemos*, a culture war, the terms of which are determined in the 21st century USA not 18th-century France and which are very clumsily handled, even on their own terms. Much more could be said.¹⁴

The jump from rumor to murder is a tricky move, *duplicitous with respect to the moral economies of the source material* is not too strong a way of putting it. This piece of distortion, effectively character assassination, has the convenient but again troublingly reductive consequence in the film of turning Joseph after his cumulative disappointments, now definitively into a victim.

The murder of the child and the loss of the lover as she returns to her unhappy respectability are seemingly meant to account for the Chevalier's subsequent and definitive turn away from the French monarchy, court and cultural establishment and toward his revolutionary involvement. This is cinematic shorthand and these are cinematic shortcuts but they do not seem to me to meet a reasonable standard for the use of artistic license since they tend to reduce the character of the biopic to that of a wounded reactionary-revolutionary (which ends up being less interesting than it sounds and indeed to pass up on so much in the rich later years of Bologne's life). It reduces the complex, messy interplay of the personalities, ideas and forces in play in the 1780s and 90s to an inevitability.

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to give a sense of how an eminently, not merely adventurously *romanesque* but *glamorously, kinetically*, I want to say even *inherently* cinematic life like that of Saint-George has so far been treated by filmmakers with varied means and intentions, and provided a few examples of how he has figured as at least a walk-on and at most as a central inspiration in other films.

I have focused on the recent eponymous historical biopic because it has reached such a wide audience and produced a significant reception in the media and the beginnings of a reception in academic modes. For better and for worse, it will shape this cinematic generation's appreciation of the figure and his times.

Whoever and whatever the Chevalier was and represented in his turbulent late 18th century, the polemics around the cinematic representation of this indisputably remarkable individual are very much concerned with current debates.

Returning again to the kinds of questions with which we began: What would it be to *get* a life like this, to really get it? What are the inevitable limitations of our hermeneutic horizon as *citoyens* and *citoyennes* of the 21st-century Republic of Letters, in its tattered and acutely self-doubting form? What are the ethical dilemmas inherent in our poetico-cinematic-critical license relative to people of the past and past events? What duty do we have to documented facts? What duty to discretion when representing people who really

¹⁴ On the French film site *Sens critique*, Jorik Verperaven puts it this way: "Encore une drôle d'idée de la part de l'ogre Hollywood. L'histoire de cet esclave mélomane et escrimeur titré chevalier sous la monarchie française conservatrice méritait tout à fait d'être racontée, c'est à n'en pas douter. Mais quand ce sont les américains [sic] qui s'y collent avec leur façon de voir la France et l'Histoire de France, ça relève plus du fantasme que de la véracité historique... on pourrait crier à l'imposture et au manque de respect total... totalement futile..."

lived? What duty to artistic quality and respect for traditions of quality in recreating historical worlds? What concomitant duty to our contemporary, socially, politically turned, activist, world-changing principles, wherever they may lie on the political spectrum?

Double facing duty and “ineffacing what has become unbelievable.” I gesture again here, in conclusion, to these complex and productive ideas that have underlaid my commentary, along with their associated vocabulary. I will finish up by stating the obvious: the *ineffacement* of the Chevalier, that improbable, nearly unbelievable figure, is well begun—the last twenty years show us that—in the sheer profusion of scholarly and general interest articles, blogs, biographies and novelizations, cinematic and other artistic responses. It may be seen most of all in the sense of complex duty felt by so many—like those of us participating in this symposium—relative to his previous neglect.

Based upon this overview and assessment of the extent of cinematic responses, culminating in *Chevalier*, I conclude that an adequate artistic gesture, one that really gets the life and the figure of the Chevalier, the man and the suggestive, pertinent legend, still lies ahead of us, something to be fervently hoped for and anticipated.¹⁵ My guess is that this is only the beginning.

¹⁵ I briefly underline in conclusion the concordance of my arguments here with the late-breaking article by Christy Pichichero. She even employs the same language of “fervent hope” which I have left unchanged in my own text after reading her: “It is high time to do better in representing the multi-faceted histories, identities, experiences, and legacies of individuals like Joseph Bologne, chevalier de Saint-George and his mother Nanon. I fervently hope that such stories will grace screens big and small many more times, showing greater care and rigor in the future.”

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