

**BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CANONICITY,  
CELEBRITY, AND CURRICULUM VIA CULTURE-TEXTS:  
THE SECRETS OF THE PRINCESSE DE CADIGNAN AND  
ITS TV-FILM AND CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS  
(1960, 1982, 2023)<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the evolving cultural, cinematic, and educational status of *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan*, a lesser-known novella by Honoré de Balzac published in 1839, whose successive adaptations have elevated it from a commercially motivated serialized novel to a canonical culture-text. Focusing on Jean-Paul Carrère's 1960 TV-film, Jacques Deray's 1982 adaptation, and Arielle Dombasle's 2023 cinematic release, the study investigates how these versions negotiate the novella's place within *The Human Comedy*, highlighting its increasing integration into France's school curricula and its role in shaping the nation's collective memory. The article's central research question asks how these adaptations bridge the gap between canonicity, celebrity, and

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## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

curriculum, while also respond to shifting aesthetic, pedagogic, and commercial priorities. Furthermore, it explores how each adaptation engages with Diane de Cadignan's agency, the films' varied endings in comparison to the original, and the intergenerational parallels, particularly between the 1960 and 2023 versions. The analysis draws on archival records from the RTF and the ORTF, close readings of the films, and pedagogic materials including *parascolaire* [extracurricular] editions and the *Zéro de conduite* [Zero for Conduct] teaching kits, while engaging with key scholarship on adaptation, canonicity, and cultural memory. These adaptations do not merely pay homage to Balzac's work; they actively reshape its meaning and legacy. The recurring appearance of Balzac himself as a character, the intertextual allusions to his other major works such as *Father Goriot* (1835) and *Lost Illusions* (1837-1843) and the persistence of visual and narrative motifs all contribute to a cinematic reimagining of Balzac's oeuvre. In other words, *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* becomes a dynamic case study of how literary heritage is continually redefined through adaptation. It demonstrates the enduring vitality of Balzac's fiction, which never ceases to be critically, pedagogically, and cinematically reinterpreted for new generations.

**Keywords:** Adaptation; Canonization; Culture-text; Curriculum.

### Introduction

Adaptations across theatre, television, and cinema have long shaped the reception and reinvention of literary texts, accentuating the interdependence between original works and their reinterpretations within the "formation of cultural literacy and popular entertainment" (Lopez Szwydky, 2020, p. 138). This dynamic aligns with Paul Davis's concept of the "culture-text" (Davis, 1990, p. 111), wherein successive adaptations of the same work reinforce its place within the nation's collective imaginary. Originally coined to analyze the enduring appeal of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Davis's notion frames adaptations as "continuing creative process[es] in the Anglo-American imagination" (Davis, 1990, p. 111). The readers' and viewers' responses to culture-texts thus add new layers of meaning that "exist beyond the scope of the respective original" (Lopez Szwydky, 2020, p. 131), reconsider the past through contemporary practices

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

and present each version as a renewed tale influenced by the cultural zeitgeist.

Balzac's magnum opus has inspired hundreds of culture-texts that have contributed to mythologizing him as a central figure in France's cultural memory, one of the most notable being *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan*. Originally published as a serialized novel under the title *Une princesse parisienne* (A Parisian Princess) in *La Presse* from 20 to 26 August 1839, *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* later incorporated into Balzac's *Scènes de la vie Parisienne* (*Scenes from Parisian Life*) benefited from serialization's power to enhance commercial visibility. The commodification of literature, however, extended well beyond the printed page.

This article examines three French screen adaptations of *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan*: Jean-Paul Carrère's 1960 TV-film, Jacques Deray's 1982 production, and Arielle Dombasle's 2023 film. It investigates how each culture-text reimagines Balzac's novella in response to shifting sociopolitical and cultural contexts, with particular attention to the varied representations of the novella's heroine, Diane de Cadignan. The analysis of these culture-texts reveals that a novella, once seen as a commercially driven serial has, through adaptation, gained canonical legitimacy, with its reinterpretations not only integrated into France's school curriculum but also actively shaping its collective memory through which the nation defines and redefines its literary, educational, and cinematic heritage.

The article is divided into four sections. First, it discusses key concepts of adaptation, canonicity, and culture-texts, establishing why *the 1839 novella* functions effectively as a culture-text. It then explores the 1960 adaptation and the creation of the Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française (French Broadcasting and Television Office) in 1964, examining its influence on national cultural values. The third and fourth sections analyze the dissolution of the ORTF and the production of the 1982 adaptation. They also consider the novella's long absence from screens between the 1990s and early 2020s, alongside its growing curricular visibility, particularly through the 2002 Magnard edition used for educational purposes. Finally, the article examines the

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

tension between the commercial failure of Arielle Dombasle's 2023 film and its unexpected pedagogic interest, as evidenced by its inclusion in online teaching kits.

### **1. Adaptation as Canonization: Performance, Reinvention, and the Afterlives of *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan***

The term *adaptation*, much like *classic*, is inherently complex, polysemous, and continually evolving. Rooted in concepts such as intertextuality, reinvention, and restoration, it carries implicit expectations that vary depending on the medium. Each form, whether theatre, television or film, employs distinct techniques, such as dialogue and performance, editing, or *mise-en-scène*, to reinterpret the source material for its target audience. These techniques not only influence the audience's perception of the work but also shape how they understand its author, either reinforcing or challenging preconceived judgments. Adaptation is therefore multifunctional; it is not merely a reproduction but a fluid and ongoing negotiation between preservation and transformation, tradition and innovation:

Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the "original", adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized. Yet adaptation can also constitute a simpler attempt to make texts "relevant" or easily comprehensible to new audiences and readerships via the processes of proximation and updating. This can be seen as an artistic drive in many adaptations of so-called "classic" novels or drama for television and cinema. Shakespeare has been a particular focus, a beneficiary even, of these 'proximations' or updatings (Sanders, 2006, pp. 18-19).

The dynamism of adaptation thus serves to contextualize classic texts for broader audiences, ensuring their sustained relevance and comprehensibility. If literary canons are defined by their lasting cultural impact, adaptations become a key

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

mechanism through which such works remain relevant and widely disseminated. By reinterpreting classic texts in new contexts, whether linguistically or sociologically, adaptations interrogate the status of the original text, revealing that a work's place within the canon is neither fixed nor immutable. Instead, it is subject to ongoing negotiation and reinterpretation. Adaptations transcend their role as mere derivative acts. Rather, they act as an "equal player in the process of canonization" (Lopez Szwydky, 2020, p. 130), thereby bolstering cultural literacy and book sales. They also possess a salvaging quality, breathing new life into texts that might have otherwise been forgotten. This is particularly relevant for Balzac, since certain works within his magnum opus have been less frequently studied in schools, published, or adapted for the screen.

Though less commercially and critically prominent than works such as *Eugénie Grandet*, as reflected in its modest print history, fewer stand-alone editions, and limited scholarly attention, *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* has often been dismissed as "no more than an account of Diane's all too facile seduction of yet another man" (Fishler, 1985, p. 257). Yet such a reductive view overlooks the text's evolving cultural status and the ways in which canonicity is continually renegotiated through adaptation. Compact and self-contained, the novella lends itself easily to visual media, with its layered temporality, extended dialogues, and psychological depth inviting nuanced performance. Its numerous adaptations attest to its lasting resonance, revealing a canon not fixed by critical hierarchies but shaped by a work's capacity to provoke and endure. What distinguishes *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* within Balzac's oeuvre is not only its focus on an aristocratic woman in her mid-thirties, considered to be so-called old for a protagonist at the time of its publication, but also its uncommon narrative resolution: a redemptive love emerging not from youthful idealism, but from tempered desire and mutual forgiveness. This rare optimism has inspired diverse cinematic reinterpretations, allowing each generation to engage with the text through its own moral and cultural lens.

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Diane de Cadignan, the novella's eponymous heroine, stands as both a relic of the Ancien Régime (Old Rule) and a reinvented figure of the July Monarchy, a legendary seductress once known as a "Don Juan in female attire" (Balzac, 1977/Wormeley, 2005, p. 31),<sup>2</sup> now self-fashioned as a reclusive princess. Her calculated seduction of Daniel d'Arthez, a "man of action and a man of thought" (Balzac, 1977/Wormeley, 2005, p. 16),<sup>3</sup> sets in motion a subtle psychological transformation, as she shifts from artifice to sincerity, from composure to the unfamiliar vulnerability of love. One month before the novella's publication, Balzac (1990) described the work to his future wife, Madame Hanska, in deliberately provocative terms:

It is described as the finest of moral comedies: a web of falsehoods in which the thirty-seven-year-old Duchess of Maufrigneuse, later Princess de Cadignan by inheritance, succeeds in convincing her fourteenth admirer that she is a saintly, virtuous, and modest young woman. The brilliance of the work lies in portraying these falsehoods as legitimate and necessary, and in vindicating them through the power of love (p. 651).<sup>4</sup>

Balzac's ironic self-description captures a central tension of the novella: the interplay between performed virtue and the uncertain possibility of sincerity. Rather than discarding artifice,

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<sup>2</sup> Katherine Prescott Wormeley (Trans.). (2005). *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* [Ebook]. Project Gutenberg. Original text: "un vrai don Juan femelle" (Balzac, 1977, p. 982).

<sup>3</sup> Original text: "un homme d'action et homme de pensée tout à la fois" (Balzac, 1977, p. 963).

<sup>4</sup> Honoré de Balzac. (1990). *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, t. I [*Letters to Madame Hanska*, Vol. I]. Robert Laffont. The English translation of the passage is my own, as Robert Laffont's edition of *Lettres à Madame Hanska* has not been officially translated. Original text: "C'est la plus grande comédie morale qui existe. C'est l'amas de mensonges par lesquels une femme de trente-sept ans, la duchesse de Maufrigneuse, devenue princesse de Cadignan par succession, parvient à se faire prendre pour une sainte, une vertueuse, une pudique jeune fille par son quatorzième admirateur [...] Le chef-d'œuvre est d'avoir fait voir les mensonges comme justes, nécessaires, et de les justifier par l'amour" (Balzac 1990: 651).

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

the narrative focuses on a protagonist whose carefully cultivated persona is strategically reimagined. Diane, named after the Roman goddess of chastity and the hunt, embodies this ambiguity, at once autonomous and elusive, empowered yet emotionally guarded. In this context, deception serves as a vehicle for truth: rather than condemning illusion, the story shows how performance can produce genuine emotional authenticity.

The novella's theatricality makes it especially suited for reinterpretation across media, notably in film, where cultural transmission intersects with changing aesthetic and ideological contexts. Blanche Cerquiglini (2016) argues that cinema updates the classic, showing its value as material for adaptation or as a foundation for a screenplay (p. 52). Cinematic adaptations do more than transpose; they actively contribute to the cultural legitimization of a text by reshaping it for modern audiences. *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* is thus continually revitalized through adaptations, each reaffirming and recontextualizing its status within the pantheon of classic literature.

### 2. Cultural Prestige and Televised Tradition: Diane de Cadignan in the Age of the RTF (1960)

Jean-Paul Carrère's 1960 black-and-white, hour-long adaptation of the novella offers a compelling reinterpretation of Balzac's work through a highly theatrical and stylised lens, shaped by the formal and ideological constraints of early French television. The TV-film adopts a classical three-act structure, replacing the theatrical curtain with the metafictional presence of Balzac himself, played by Yves Barsacq. Armed with his emblematic cane, the character of Balzac functions as both narrator and arbiter of meaning, breaking the fourth wall to contextualise the narrative and anchor it within *the writer's oeuvre*, explicitly referencing Diane's further appearances in *The Ball at Sceaux* (1830) and *The Cabinet of Antiquities* (1838).

The *mise-en-scène* is theatrical, enhanced by slow pans, choreographed blocking, and symbolic props, notably mirrors and the princess's infamous album where she keeps a portrait of her previous lovers. Set to a classical score of flute and strings that

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

evokes a fairy-tale atmosphere reminiscent of *Snow White*, the film positions itself as an allegorical retelling, steeped in romantic idealism. Within this fairy-tale structure, each character assumes a distinct role: Diane de Cadignan, portrayed by Gisèle Pascal, as the princess; Daniel d'Arthez, played by Renaud Mary, as the prince; Madame d'Espard, played by Eléonore Hirt, as the villainess; and her entourage, including Rastignac and Maxime de Trailles, as her conspiratorial henchmen. Balzac's appearances punctuate the film's tripartite rhythm—at the beginning, midpoint, and end—reinforcing the moralising cadence typical of both fable and early television drama.

The adaptation's pedagogic undertones must be understood within the context of French television's evolving institutional mission during the 1950s and 60s. Raymond Kuhn (1995) argues that "between 1958 and 1969, household ownership of television sets in France rose from under 10% to nearly 70%, firmly establishing television as a dominant cultural medium" (pp. 109–110). Jean d'Arcy, director of programmes for the Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française (French Radio and Television) from 1954 to 1959, sought to democratise access to highbrow literature, thus elevating television to the status of a highbrow medium. According to Anne-Marie Baron (2014), this technique was popularized by the approaches of the Buttes-Chaumont studios and school of thought. This filmmaking style favoured in-studio filming, static cameras, extreme close-ups, intelligibly dense dialogues and a clear unity of style which labeled it as heavy-handed and academic (Baron, 2014). TV films of this era were therefore promoted as prestigious, educational and culturally significant. They underlined the theatrical and tragic side of classic works, reimagining an aesthetic that was strongly reminiscent of French plays from the seventeenth century.

Although Jean d'Arcy was replaced in 1959 by Albert Ollivier, who prioritised cinematic productions over live ones, the emphasis on television culture remained strong. Jérôme Bourdon (2014) suggests that Ollivier championed a form of grandiose television for the greater public (Bourdon, 2014), recruiting directors from the burgeoning Nouvelle Vague, with the hopes of expanding television's cinematic language. Despite the state

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

monopoly and strong political undercurrents, with General de Gaulle famously using broadcasting as a “crucial tool in the implementation and dissemination of his political agenda” (Mazdon, 2017, p. 173), the drive to educate and elevate through culture remained a central tenet of public broadcasting. As Brian Rigby observes, “a universalist, humanist conception of *Culture*—with a capital C—continued to inform French cultural policy well into the 1960s” (Rigby, 1991, p. 4). This conception of Culture, rooted in the republican ideals of national unity and intellectual refinement, privileged the dissemination of France’s canonical works. Adaptations of nineteenth-century classic authors thus played a central role in the pedagogic mission of post-war French television, functioning both as an accessible form of entertainment and as a vehicle of cultural legitimacy. Television adaptations of Balzac’s work aligned with the broader goals of disseminating French culture with a capital C. They reinforced a shared literary heritage, promoted educational ideals, and positioned television as a legitimate media for national culture and pride.

Despite the technical limitations of the period, most notably static camerawork and rudimentary sound, Carrère’s adaptation manages to portray moments of visual dynamism. A striking example occurs during the final dinner at Madame d’Espard’s salon, where a combination of fixed and panoramic shots is carefully orchestrated to heighten dramatic tension. As the assembled guests gossip about Diane’s controversial past, the camera lingers on Daniel d’Arthez’s unreadable expression before slowly panning across the room to capture the reactions of other attendees. His final speech closely echoes the original text:

The greatest fault of that woman is that she has followed in the wake of men. She squanders patrimonies as they do; she drives her lovers to usurers; she pockets ‘dots’; she ruins orphans; she inspires, possibly she commits, crimes, but—”

Never had the two men, whom d’Arthez was chiefly addressing, listened to such plain talk. At that BUT the whole table was startled, everyone paused, fork in air, their eyes fixed alternately on the brave author and on the

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

assailants of the princess, awaiting the conclusion of that horrible silence.

*“But,”* said d’Arthez, with sarcastic airiness, “Madame la Princesse de Cadignan has one advantage over men: when they have put themselves in danger for her sake, she saves them, and says no harm of anyone. Among the multitude, why shouldn’t there be one woman who amuses herself with men as men amuse themselves with women? Why not allow the fair sex to take, from time to time, its revenge?” (Balzac, 1977/Wormeley, 2005, p. 47)<sup>5</sup>

His discourse offers a proto-feminist defence of Diane, challenging rigid gender norms. Carrère’s adaptation, however, reframes this subversion with irony. Daniel d’Arthez is no longer an idealist swayed by Diane’s stories and seductive ruses. Instead, he is a knowing figure who calmly sees through them. His intuitive authority reconfigures the power dynamic, casting Diane’s seduction as secondary to her submission. What was once a vindication of female autonomy has now become a moral arc anchored in male forgiveness. The film thus transforms Balzac’s subversive narrative into a conventional romance, shaped by mid-century ideals of femininity and redemption. Diane’s intelligence is softened, her allure sentimentalized, and her self-fashioning reframed as existential angst.

This dynamic culminates in the climactic scene where Diane burns her album of lovers, an act that is omitted in the novella. Dressed in white, she performs a ritual of renunciation, declaring with childlike sincerity: “My dear, you have won me over, you have saved me. Thanks to you, I am now in the same place I was at the end of my childhood, when the world’s ugliness

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<sup>5</sup> Original text: “Le plus grand tort de cette femme est d’aller sur les brisés des hommes, dit-il. Elle dissipe comme eux des biens paraphernaux, elle envoie ses amants chez les usuriers, elle dévore des dots, elle ruine des orphelins, elle fond de vieux châteaux, elle inspire et commet peut-être aussi des crimes, mais...Mais, dit d’Arthez avec une moqueuse légèreté, Mme la princesse de Cadignan a sur les hommes un avantage : quand on s’est mis en danger pour elle, elle vous sauve, et ne dit de mal de personne. Pourquoi, dans le nombre, ne se trouverait-il pas une femme qui s’amusât des hommes, comme les hommes s’amusent des femmes ? Pourquoi le beau sexe ne prendrait-il pas de temps en temps une revanche ?” (Balzac 1977: 1002-1003).

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

was still hidden from me” (Carrère, 1960, 1:01:09). Daniel d’Arthez’s remark: “*The Princesse de Cadignan no longer exists*” (Carrère, 1960, 1:01:29) signals the erasure of the self-fashioned persona Diane once embodied. Her redemption is presented not as a reconciliation of identities but rather as their dissolution; to be saved, she must first be stripped of her autonomy. The film thus recasts Balzac’s nuanced heroine into a sentimental figure whose strength is weakened by love. Rather than affirming equality, her transformation upholds a conservative vision of femininity, where male constancy redeems female transgression. Even her most candid moments, such as her heartfelt exchanges with the housekeeper, Francine, serve to domesticate her, reframing her as a nurturing figure in need of emotional anchoring. The paradox is striking: Diane, once a skilled manipulator of social codes, is rendered vulnerable through her rescue. Her carefully calculated strategies to influence her lovers’ emotions are recast as simple longing, and her former agency is transformed into dependence.

Carrère’s adaptation erases the feminist undercurrents of Balzac’s novella, reframing Diane’s trajectory as one of romantic idealism. Her fulfilment depends on relinquishing her identity as the Princess de Cadignan, a figure whose agency once challenged the patriarchal order. Whereas the novella critiques and subverts gender norms, reworking traditional romance narratives, the film opts for a happy ending, presenting Diane as a damsel in distress. The adaptation thus recasts Diane as an archetype: an independent yet incomplete woman whose identity attains fulfilment solely through love. No longer the architect of her own destiny, she becomes a softened heroine whose journey ends in surrender. In reflecting mid-twentieth-century broadcasting conventions, the film undermines Diane’s agency and strength, replacing them with emotional dependence. In other words, her fate is no longer self-fashioned but contingent on being understood by a “man of genius” (Balzac, 1977/ Wormeley, 2005, p. 13). In substituting Balzac’s irony with redemptive sentiment, the adaptation reasserts traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of romance.

### 3. Televising the Classic: Balzac, the ORTF, and the Cultural Politics of Adaptation (1949-82)

In the twenty years the RTF existed, reforming its platform to the ORTF from 1964 to 1974, more than ten TV-films inspired by Balzac's *magnum opus* were produced. As an "instrument of the government's policy" (Kuhn, 1995, p. 116), the ORTF promoted the nation's literary heritage by guiding, as Mette (2019) argues, the novice reader toward the classics, offering them a gradual entryway into genuine culture (Mette, 2019). In response to the growing dominance and threat of American television, the ORTF sought to reaffirm the "civilizing benefits of the nation's cultural heritage" (Mazdon, 2017, p. 173), chiefly championing and adapting the works of France's classic authors.

Heavily centralized and government-controlled, the ORTF played a dominant role in the French media landscape. This centralisation was underscored by Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas, who, according to Fickers and Johnson believed that the ORTF represented the voice of France (Fickers & Johnson, 2012). In this context, adaptations of Balzac's work became key vehicles for both cultural prestige and mass entertainment. The influence of institutions such as the Buttes-Chaumont studios was pivotal in institutionalising a conservative, more scholarly approach to literary adaptation. Reputable directors of the period such as Maurice Cazeneuve, Marcel Cravenne, and Guy Jorré capitalised on Balzac's status as a classic writer to legitimize the growing popularity of television programmes and guarantee a wider viewership, thereby maximizing their chances of critical and commercial success.

Balzac-inspired adaptations continued to increase in subsequent years, especially after the abolition of the ORTF in 1974. The presidential election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing that same year marked a political shift away from Gaullist ideology. Lucy Mazdon (2017) suggests that in an effort to demonstrate his liberal media credentials, Giscard oversaw a reorganisation of the ORTF, replacing it with seven independently run entities: Télédiffusion de France, Société française de production, Institut national de l'audiovisuel, Radio France, Télévision française 1,

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Antenne 2, and France Régions 3 (Mazdon, 2017). Although these reforms granted more autonomy to individual broadcasters, the state continued to impose cultural obligations to inform, educate, and reflect national values, while also introducing quotas that specified the number of serious programmes that needed to be aired across genres. Furthermore, Mazdon (2017) observes that channels had to allocate slots to the Ministry of Education for school and university programming (Mazdon, 2017). This structural change, however, “did not represent the break from the past that was claimed,” (Kuhn, 1995, p. 151), since the government continued to exert significant influence over national broadcasting.

The ideological framework of French television also evolved during this period. Whereas earlier cultural policy aligned with Gaullist ideals of disseminating culture with a capital C, Mazdon (2017) suggests that post-1968 shifts in elitist attitudes saw mass culture increasingly acknowledged as a legitimate component of popular culture (Mazdon, 2017). The culmination of these changes came in 1982, when the state monopoly was officially dissolved by a broadcasting bill passed in Parliament. While this marked a decisive moment in French media history, anticipating a more liberal government during the Mitterrand presidency, many of the television productions created during this transitional period still retained characteristics from the film-making era of the ORTF. Such was the case with Jacques Deray’s *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan*, which aired on France Régions 3 in 1982. With its emphasis on voice-over narration, theatrical *mise-en-scène*, and psychological introspection, the film’s complex representation of female subjectivity reveals an engagement with sociopolitical developments, notably second-wave feminism. With a runtime of 1h32, it offers an intricate exploration of the historical, sociological, and psychological dimensions central to the novella, including the evolution of Diane’s aristocratic status. Adapted by Jean-Claude Carrière, the screenplay preserves numerous passages from Balzac’s text while introducing innovative cinematic devices such as flashbacks.

The film begins with Diane de Cadignan’s relocation to her new apartment, framed against the distant backdrop of

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Republican bombardments. The camera lingers on a photo album, later revisited throughout the film, which serves as both an emotional artifact and a key narrative device. Voice-overs shift between Diane de Cadignan and Daniel d'Arthez, drawing spectators into their private reflections and evoking the intimate, contemplative style characteristic of earlier ORTF productions. Claude Bolling's classical score enhances the film's refined *mise-en-scène*, yet the strategic silences, most notably during the heroine's deceptive lies to her lover, intensify both tension and suspense. Deraï also incorporates flashbacks to develop secondary characters, particularly Michel Chrétien, an ardent admirer of Diane who ultimately perishes in the battle of Saint-Merri. This interplay of temporal layers accentuates the film's emotional complexity, prompting viewers to consider whether Diane remains the author of her own story or is instead increasingly confined by the very myths she once constructed.

Claudine Auger's portrayal of Diane de Cadignan represents a striking departure from Gisèle Pascal's coquettish charm in the 1960 adaptation. By the 1980s, Auger had become a prominent figure in French cinema, having risen to international fame with her role as Dominique "Domino" Derval in the 1965 James Bond film, *Thunderball*. As in that earlier performance, Auger brings to the screen a strong-willed, independent woman; yet her interpretation of Diane is markedly more restrained. Solemn, subdued, and at times morose, her version of Diane appears less as a fairy-tale heroine than as a disillusioned aristocrat, burdened by the weight of memory and loss. Her visual presentation further reinforces this transformation: with vivid red hair and a wardrobe in rich, sombre tones, particularly shades of purple, she acquires an aura that imbues the character with symbolic weight and dramatic presence. Michel Pastoureau and Dominique Simmonet (2005) note that the colour purple, though traditionally linked to royalty, is also tied to half-mourning, a stage of grief that gradually diminishes with time. It evokes feminine aging, gentle like the mauve highlights in the hair of elderly women (Pastoureau & Simmonet, 2005). This chromatic palette thus offers a poignant lens through which to

## ***IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR***

view Diane's character, whose reflections increasingly suggest a world of gentle decline, ambiguity, and veiled truths.

Like his female co-star, François Marthouret's portrayal of Daniel d'Arthez is marked by quiet stoicism. This version of Daniel is cautious, emotionally reserved, and deliberately measured, far removed from the assertiveness and confidence that define the righteous male hero in the 1960 adaptation. Although he ultimately defends Diane, as in the original novella, this version of Daniel d'Arthez never suspects the nature of her deception. In contrast to the 1960 version, where Daniel quickly sees through Diane's carefully constructed façade, Deray's adaptation sustains the young man's unwavering faith in her deception. Diane fabricates a story involving her mother, claiming that she sacrificed her own happiness to repay a debt of love to Monsieur de Maufrigneuse, marrying Diane to him at the age of seventeen not out of maternal care but as a cold transaction to honour a former lover. This calculated invention casts Diane as a victim of exploitation, securing Daniel's sympathy. His prolonged trust in her lie intensifies the dramatic tension and gives greater emotional force to Diane's eventual confession, which shatters the illusion and forces their idealised relationship into a painful confrontation.

Rather than travelling to Geneva in the warmer months, as Balzac originally wrote, the couple retreats to the Italian coast. Diane appears in a flowing white dress, embodying the image of an "angel of his dreams" (Balzac 1977/2005, p. 27), an idealised figure that deepens the film's dramatic irony. However, this illusion soon shatters when Diane receives a letter announcing her mother's death. Their return to Paris marks the slow unravelling of this carefully constructed romance, as the first fissures in their idyllic world begin to open. Dressed again in sombre tones of purple, foreshadowing the solitude that awaits her, Diane finally confesses the truth to Daniel d'Arthez. Her confession is disarmingly self-aware: "Your friends would say that I am a liar, but there is another reason. Every woman wants to appear virtuous in the eyes of the man she wants to love" (Deray, 1982, 1:23:02). She insists that her deception was not rooted in malice but in a desperate longing for authentic love. However,

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Daniel d'Arthez, a man of letters and of unyielding moral conviction, cannot look past the lie. The reckoning that follows culminates in the young woman's heartbreaking realisation that the person with whom he fell in love was never truly her, but rather the idea of her, an illusion she had so carefully constructed: "You loved my lie. The woman you loved wasn't me (Deray, 1982, 1:24:15). She yearned to be loved for who she was yet could only inspire affection through artifice: "I wanted to be loved for who I am, for who I always was" (Deray, 1982, 1:25:11). The voice-over confirms the irreversibility of their parting: "He is never coming back" (Deray, 1982, 1:27:32).

In the film's closing sequence, Daniel d'Arthez returns to his writing, resuming the intellectual vocation that had been temporarily disrupted by his passionate love for Diane. The young heroine, by contrast, engages in a final conversation with Madame d'Espard in the quietude of her garden:

**Madame d'Espard:** Will you one day tell me the reason for your breakup, that the world deems as your sacrifice?

**Diane de Cadignan:** That is ridiculous. I never sacrificed anything.

**Madame d'Espard:** So, you don't regret anything?

**Diane de Cadignan:** No. My regret would have been not learning what I have learned.

**Madame d'Espard:** Was it worth it?

**Diane de Cadignan:** Oh yes. (Deray, 1982, 1:29:44)

Rather than offering a sentimental or reconciliatory conclusion, Diane articulates a paradox that echoes her reflections in the novella: "We may love and not be happy; we may be happy and never love; but to love and be happy, to unite those two immense human experiences, is a miracle" (Balzac 1977/2005, p. 11).<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Diane embodies a Balzacian view of human experience as fundamentally divided or fragmented.

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<sup>6</sup> Original text: "Nous pouvons aimer sans être heureuses, nous pouvons être heureuses sans aimer; mais aimer et avoir du bonheur, réunir ces deux immenses jouissances humaines, est un prodige. Ce prodige ne s'est pas accompli pour moi" (Balzac 1977: 957).

## **IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR**

Love and happiness, though not mutually exclusive, are rarely conjoined. Their confluence, she implies, is not a right but an exception, a miracle that eluded her. The film's closing exchange between Diane de Cadignan and Madame d'Espard moves beyond the emotional terrain of personal loss and into the realm of metaphysical reflection laden with existential undertones:

**Madame d'Espard:** So, the world isn't a place of suffering?

**Diane de Cadignan:** It is indeed, but it is much more than that. It is a joy, a light, a battle.

**Madame d'Espard:** Between who?

**Diane de Cadignan:** That is a secret. As far as I am concerned, this battle was without a doubt my last, and I do not even know whether I have won or lost. (Dera y, 1982, 1:32:43)

Diane's deliberately evasive response accentuates her refusal to explicate the precise terms of her existential struggle, thereby signalling that the "battle" to which she refers is not external or easily definable, but rather interior, incommunicable, and potentially unresolved. The traditional binaries of triumph and defeat are rendered irrelevant in the context of subjective experience. Diane's formulation does not gesture toward resolution but rather towards an acute awareness that life's most profound confrontations, whether emotional, ethical, or psychological, frequently circumvent definitive outcomes.

Instead of positioning Diane de Cadignan as a passive or victimised figure, as does Carrère in his 1960 production, the 1982 film presents her as a composed, reflective, and morally complex heroine. Her self-fashioning and emotional agency are foregrounded, rendering her a more ambiguous and intellectually nuanced character, much closer in tone to Balzac's characterization of the young woman. The film also broadens its scope to examine the dynamics of female intellect. The insightful dialogues between Diane de Cadignan and Madame d'Espard move beyond mere exposition to serve as critical sites of philosophical inquiry. Through these exchanges, the adaptation raises broader questions concerning female pleasure, emotional

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

sincerity, and fulfilment, portraying them as active negotiation sites between idealism, memory, and lived experiences.

### **4. From Screen to Syllabus: Teaching *Les Secrets de la princesse de Cadignan* in a Fragmented Media Landscape**

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a period of transition in the French cultural and media landscapes. Public television, which had experienced a golden age from the 1950s to the 1980s, entered an era of increasing instability. Mazdon (2017) points out that this era was marked by a diversification and fragmentation of the French audiovisual sphere, leaving the role of television, especially public service broadcasting, in an increasingly uncertain position (Mazdon, 2017). These changes were further accelerated by the rise of the internet, which introduced new modes of media consumption and intensified competition for viewer attention. Although *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* was absent from television and cinematic screens during this time, its diminished visibility in mass media was counterbalanced by a growing curricular and editorial presence. Following the 2008 introduction of art history which promoted interdisciplinary approaches to literature, educators increasingly used films as pedagogic tools for teaching canonical texts. As Brigitte Louichon (2012) observes, this reform encouraged the screening of performances and films in the classroom (Louichon, 2012), enabling students to engage with literature not only through close reading but also through audiovisual media.

Magnard's 2002 edition of *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan*, edited by Michel Dobransky and Jean-Paul Brighelli, exemplifies the integration of classic literature into a modern pedagogic framework. It underlines the novella's intertextual references to seventeenth- and nineteenth-century texts, its thematic focus on seduction, myth, and narrative construction, and its cinematic resonance. Through this pedagogic edition, the novella is presented as both a classic literary work and a fertile site for interdisciplinary exploration. The edition exemplifies how educational publishing can compensate for a novella's absence

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

from the big screen, reframing it as a valuable tool for multimedia and comparative learning.

Unlike the early 2000s, the 2020s have witnessed a renewed wave of Balzac-inspired film adaptations, echoing a similar revival in the 1990s. Among the most notable examples are Marc Dugain's *Eugenie Grandet* (2021), Xavier Giannoli's *Lost Illusions* (2021), and Arielle Dombasle's *The Secrets of the Princesse de Cadignan* (2023). Dombasle's film stands out for its highly stylised, theatrical, and flamboyant approach, incorporating metafictional elements—most notably the presence of Balzac, portrayed by Michel Fau, a creative choice that recalls the 1960 version. In contrast to the 1960 version, where Balzac functions merely as a narrator, Dombasle casts him as an active character who carefully observes Diane. This decision not only reflects the director's aim to present a more open-minded and progressive portrayal of Balzac but also underscores her intention to highlight the complexity, modernity, and sexual fluidity of female identity. Despite its artistic ambition, the film drew mixed critical responses. Anne-Marie Baron (2023) praised it for its feminist undertones (Baron, 2023), whereas Murielle Joudet (2023) dismissed it as a self-indulgent spectacle (Joudet, 2023). These polarised reactions reveal broader cultural tensions surrounding classic novel-to-film adaptations, particularly the competing demands of aesthetic innovation and narrative fidelity.

French scholars have noted a persistent purist approach that prioritizes textual fidelity, often marginalizing adaptations that deviate from the perceived authority of the literary source. The negative reactions to Dombasle's adaptation and Ridley Scott's dramatization of Napoleon's life in his 2023 film illustrate this tendency, revealing critics' strong reflex to scrutinize anachronisms and narrative liberties when directors adapt works central to France's literary canon. This perspective echoes what Constantine Verevis has defined as the logic of "*BADaptation*" a term that "captures the drive towards the denigration of adaptation as 'bad theoretical object'" (Verevis, 2014, p. 216), which, as argued by Madeleine Hunter, routinely "employs a rhetoric of betrayal and degradation, of infidelity to some idealized original" (Hunter, 2024, p. 480).

## ***IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR***

One of the principal reasons Dombasle's film may be regarded as a "badaptation" lies less in its use of anachronistic music or historically inaccurate costumes than in its casting choices and directorial vision. Dombasle's portrayal of the protagonist and her flamboyant, eclectic public persona—well known in the French press as both actress and singer—make her an unconventional choice for a Balzac-inspired adaptation. Her celebrity status, inseparable from her aesthetic, inevitably shapes audience expectations. Unlike Jacques Rivette's auteur-driven adaptations, which often cast established stars such as Guillaume Depardieu and Jeanne Balibar, Dombasle's film embraces a more populist approach, unabashedly rooted in broader cultural currents. In doing so, the film challenges the cultural hierarchies that typically structure the reception of serious adaptations, inviting instead a kitsch- and camp-inflected mode of engagement. This, however, is precisely where its subversive potential resides and why it may have been incorporated into online teaching kits.

As literary studies increasingly embrace visual literacy and hybridity, Dombasle's film emerges as a powerful case study in how irreverence and invention can reinvigorate the canon. It dissolves entrenched binaries—literature/ film, canonical/ popular, historical fidelity/ modern invention—and replaces them with dynamic tensions: feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homoerotic, old/ new, real/ fantasy, nature/ opera, female/male gaze. The film should be understood less as a failed homage to Balzac and more as a deliberate act of aesthetic and ideological reclamation. Its so-called infidelities do not constitute flaws but function as intentional provocations, inviting careful critical engagement. "Badaptation" can thus be reconceptualized not as mere failure but as an insightful critical framework. It encourages a critical examination and rethinking of established ideas, such as fidelity and hierarchical relationships between the original text and its adaptation, thereby opening new avenues for understanding the complexities and pedagogic potential of adaptations. As Salé argues:

## IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

The film reflects its maker, a true one-woman band who takes on the roles of writer, director, actress, and singer. In adapting Balzac's short story, Arielle Dombasle reconnects with her earliest cinematic inspirations—Rohmer's films—where her refined and meticulous diction created a distinctive layer of artifice well-suited to exploring and dissecting emotions. She also collaborated with artist friends, including costume designer Vincent Darré, whose flamboyant creations evoke Fellini's *Casanova*, and celebrated decorator Jacques Garcia, known for his 'sexy and grand genre' style, who offered the opulent settings of the Château du Champ de Bataille in Normandy. This aesthetic of excess, while honouring Balzac's novelistic abundance, remains consistent with the spirit of female dandyism embodied by the filmmaker (Salé, 2023, p. 16).

Dombasle's *film thus* emerges as an experimental shift in adaptation aesthetics—neither strictly realist nor wholly fantastic, neither conventionally heritage nor fully post-heritage. Its playful pastiche, reflexivity, and intertextual excess echo the unruly ambition of *The Human Comedy*, embracing fragmentation and multiplicity over narrative coherence or historical fidelity. What some critics dismiss as “badness” might better be read as a purposeful disruption, a challenge to entrenched hierarchies of taste and legitimacy. In rejecting the tropes of auteur cinema and the solemnity of heritage adaptation, Dombasle offers a vibrant counter-model, one that treats adaptation not as a preservationist gesture, but as a dynamic act of cultural re-writing. The film's significance, therefore, lies in its readiness to experiment, challenge conventions, and reimagine a thought-provoking text for a new generation of viewers and students.

The pedagogic relevance of cinematic adaptations is further reinforced by a 2024 study conducted in Algeria. It compares two cohorts of students engaging with Balzac's 1835 novel, *Father Goriot*. One group viewed Jean-Daniel Verhaeghe's 2004 TV-film prior to reading the novel, while the control group read the text without any audiovisual support. C. Hamdad and A. Hamdad (2024) observed that students who viewed the film before reading the novel finished it more quickly, faced fewer obstacles,

## ***IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR***

and experienced a wider range of deeper emotions, which fostered a stronger engagement with both characters and themes. In contrast, the control group, lacking this preliminary exposure, had difficulty understanding the subtleties of the plot and the characters' motivations, which diminished their overall appreciation of the text (C. Hamdad; A. Hamdad, 2024). The relatively small sample sizes and context-specific nature of these findings highlight the need for further empirical research to confirm and refine them. Nevertheless, the online educational kits, together with this study, point to a broader pedagogic shift toward multimedia strategies in the classroom. In particular, film adaptations, especially of authors such as Balzac and Flaubert, whose works students often find challenging, are increasingly used not merely as supplementary tools, but as interpretative gateways that deepen engagement with complex texts and encourage alternative modes of reading.

### **Conclusion**

The shifting portrayals of Diane de Cadignan—from independent to dependent, from seductive to androgynous—highlight both the flexibility of Balzacian characterization and the dual function of adaptation as translation and transformation. The ongoing presence of Balzac on screen reflects a persistent impulse not only to preserve the classics but to reimagine them. These reinterpretations respond to changing cultural, political, pedagogic, and aesthetic priorities. Adaptations simultaneously expand and complicate the Balzac canon while earning recognition as autonomous works, whether as auteur-driven cinema, commercially successful productions, or critically contested films. The very diversity of these adaptations attests to the enduring vitality and versatility of Balzac's fiction. Perhaps the true secret of Diane de Cadignan lies less in the novella itself than in the generative power of Balzac's oeuvre, which continues to be reshaped critically, pedagogically, and cinematically for new audiences and future generations.

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