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Film and Literature

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Mini-Essay Number Two

Andre Bazin argues that within the unity of different art forms each distinctive outer packaging of a text is irrelevant and what is important is in the keeping of the spirit and soul of that meaning. When adapting from one form to another, remaining faithful is impossible and so as long as the meanings of the text are equivalent, it is a successful adaptation.

Form is at most a sign, a visible manifestation, of style, which is absolutely inseparable from the narrative content, of which it is, in a manner of speaking and according to Sartre's use of the word, the metaphysics. Under these circumstances, faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is the equivalence in meaning of the form (20).

Patrick McGrath's novel of *Spider* when adapted over to David Cronenberg's film successfully fulfilled Andre Bazin's call for equivalence in adaptation. They're three significant differences that were made in both the literary and cinematic versions of *Spider*, all three which satisfy Bazin's claim regarding equivalence within their given medium.

The character of Spider is a disturbed and fascinating character study and the novel's haunting narration perfectly gives readers a disturbing and menacing pathology inside the mind of a disturbed young man who is suffering from mental illness. A young boy emerging from his adolescent sexuality, Spider saw his beloved mother as a sexual being and became greatly confused by his emotions. He ultimately becomes traumatized by these thoughts and feelings and for a way to cope with them he creates a fantastical scenario in his head in which his father brutally murders his mother. His father's mistress Hilda then comes into the child's life and takes over the role of Spider's mother. Upset with this Spider plans to kill the two of them, but instead ends up killing his mother who was never dead to begin with. All throughout the novel we can feel Spider's slow detachment from reality and his delusional thoughts and feelings that manifest into madness.

The first difference is the first person narration of *Spider* that was brilliantly written by Patrick McGrath within the novel. "I wanted her out of my room! I mumbled something about my insects; in my mind's eye I saw her on top of my father, going up and down and gasping like a fish" (90). In David Cronenberg's film of *Spider* this haunting voiceover narration is absent, and instead we watch the adult Spider (Ralph Fiennes) try and piece his life together after being released from a mental hospital. In the film Cronenberg presents such themes of reality and fantasy by including a sequence of Spider struggle in putting a puzzle together, starting from the middle, without looking at the picture of what the finished puzzle should look like.

The second difference is the way McGrath and Cronenberg both utilize both mediums to present to the audience the exact moment that Spider created the character of Hilda, by subconsciously splitting his mother into two different people. In the novel, Spider never sees his mother get murdered and only describes his father burying something out in the potato patch

while Hilda watches. In the film Spider goes to the Dog to retrieve his father for supper which is where he first sees Hilda (Miranda Richardson) for the first time but his father (Gabriel Byrne) does not. When examining this scene closely it is revealed that the actress Miranda Richardson is not playing the role of Hilda, and instead it is played by a completely different actress. In the scene that follows Spider recounts his father and mother arriving to the Dog where his father finally notices Hilda for the very first time. It is from this moment on that Hilda is played by Miranda Richardson who is the very same actress that plays Spider's mother.

The third difference is how both the author and the director have the spectator questioning the reliability of Spider's memory while portraying Spider's emerging sexuality. In the novel they're extremely explicit details that Spider describes between Spider's father and Hilda that would have made it impossible for young Spider to have known, even if he would have watched from afar. In the novel, young Spider looks at Hilda and describes her provocatively saying, "But it was Hilda I was really watching, and as she went about her scrubbing and peeling I noted with secret fascination how her arms and thighs and breasts swelled and shifted beneath the skirts and aprons that had once graced the slender figure of my mother" (116). In the film Spider's sexuality is portrayed slightly differently. During his father's first sexual encounter with Hilda, down under the bridge, Spider transforms into his father just after his father climaxes. This visual camera trick effectively presents to us Spider's sexual desire to want to be with his mother the same way that his father is.

"The reason is that the work of art was not an end in itself, the only important criteria were its content and the effectiveness of its message (24)." With regard to the story of *Spider*, both the novel and the film equally create the equivalence in meaning that Bazin states. Spider's thoughts, memories and mental stability are called into question within both forms, wherein the

novel he reconstructed these memories through his words while the film visually presented these memories with the older self within his own flashbacks. Novel and film both successfully preserve the meaning, soul and spirit of *Spider*.