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Film and Literature

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Mini-Essay Number One

Walter Mosley's novel *Devil in a Blue Dress* was adapted by director Carl Franklin and its adaptation can be reduced to three separate relations between the film and the text. Dudley Andrew defines the three stating: "If we confine ourselves to those cases where the adaptation process is foregrounded—that is, where the original is held up as a worthy source or goal—there are still several possible modes of relation between film and the written text. These modes can, for convenience, be reduced to three: borrowing, intersection and fidelity and transformation"(29). The two categories that *Devil in a Blue Dress* fall into are borrowing and fidelity and transformation, and I will present specific examples on how exactly they're used throughout the two different sources.

In an adaptation which uses borrowing Andrew states: "In the history of the arts, surely borrowing is the most frequently used mode of adaptation. Here the artist employs, more or less extensively, the material, idea or form of an earlier, generally successful text" (30). Borrowing is when the source material is literally taking from the original text word for word whether it's the name of the characters, locations, and the basic conflict and themes of its story. Most of the

characters in the movie are directly lifted from the book, and its basic themes of race, inequality, and violence are presented within both versions.

The relationship between Easy Rawlings (Denzel Washington) and Daphne (Jennifer Beals) in the film is greatly borrowed from the Mosley's novel, but the film omits the steamy interracial sex scene which the novel used to emphasize the racial drama between the two characters. The film also borrows much of the romantic conflict between Daphne and Todd Carter (Terry Kinney) but shifted the personality of Daphne in the novel from more of a femme fatale who stole money, lied and seduced men, into more of a victim who loved a white man which ultimately led to her downfall.

The second category that *Devil in a Blue Dress* uses is fidelity and transformation in which Andrew describes stating:

Unquestionably the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation (and of film and literature relations as well) concerns fidelity and transformation. Here we have a clear-cut case of film's trying to measure up to a literary work or of an audience's expecting to make such a comparison. Fidelity of adaptation is conventionally treated in relation to the 'letter' and to the 'spirit' of a text, as though adaptation were the rendering of an interpretation of a legal precedent.

The spirit of the text encompasses the segregated friction between the whites and the blacks, and much of the text involved Easy's voiceover on his opinions on race, inequality and his horrors of the war. Much of the film loses Easy's voiceover and so we lose much of Easy's

thoughts, insights and tensions on race. Instead director Carl Franklin's use of fidelity and transformation for the film attempts to communicate the spirit of the novel and its tensions of race and inequality immediately with the opening credit sequence. Whereas Mosley's novel brilliantly describes in vivid detail the gritty landscape for our main protagonist, Franklin instead effectively shows us this environment with the use of the opening and ending credit sequence.

The *mise en scène* in the opening sequence presents to the spectator a painting of Los Angeles with the music of blues playing on the soundtrack. After the camera pulls away the shot reveals a crowded African American neighborhood as it glides through the city streets. In the sequence of Easy walking to John's Speakeasy you can see two white police officers arresting a black man sprawled on top of the hood of his car. These detailed visual sequences aren't presented in the novel, but they add to the film much of the racial tension that was originally lost through much of the voiceover. "The explicit, fore grounded relation of a cinematic text to a well-constructed original text from which it derives and which in some sense it strives to reconstruct provides the analyst with a clear and useful 'laboratory' condition that should not be neglected" (29).

Franklin successfully adapts Dudley Andrew's theory of film and the text using borrowing which takes some liberties with the novel by removing Easy and Daphne's intense affair and character flaws, which gives the character's a more likable appeal and makes it easier for the spectator to want to root for them near the end. Franklin's film also successfully adapts using fidelity which preserves the spirit of Mosley's novel by including visual sequences that present the tense race relations within the neighborhood. Using both of these elements shows that you can successfully adapt the original themes of the novel by using the strengths of the particular medium that is being used.