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Film and Literature

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Mini-Essay Number Five

Daniel Clowes' graphic novel *Ghost World* is the story of Enid and Becky, two best friends who drift throughout their adolescent world having moments where they question their own sexuality. Enid and Becky's relationship begins to get rocky when Enid considers going to college after high school and doesn't consult Becky on this news. Enid doesn't pass the entrance exam to get into college, but the strain of possibly losing one another ironically still becomes too much for the friendship to bear. There's a couple like this in every high school in which you have the intellectual outsiders who fight off the world with the use of satiric pranks and an ironic commentary on how they view the world.

Brian McFarlane identifies four significant areas of exploration regarding what he calls 'Adaptation Proper' and I will explore how these specific areas are similar to past theories we've learned throughout the semester. The first one is 'Two signifying systems' which is narrative (which can be transferred) and enunciation (which cannot separate systems of signification.) "The novel draws on a wholly verbal sign system, the film variously, and sometimes simultaneously, on visual, aural, and verbal signifiers" (26). The major factor which separates the two mediums is the verbal sign, which works conceptually on the page with words and

perceptually though film with the use of visuals and symbols. The second area is the novels 'Linearity' and the films 'Spatiality.' The novels linearity favors the gradual acceleration of information about action, characters, atmosphere, ideas and modes of representation. The films spatiality is where the eye may not always choose to see what is next in the frame and the challenge of the filmmaker's control of mise en scene is more obvious" (27).

Because the film medium has no literary vocabulary spectators are given three series of symbolic 'codes' which help enable them to read film narratives and apply a form of meaning. The first code is language which is a response to accents or the tone of a person's voice. The second code is visual codes which respond beyond seeing to include interpretative and selective. The third is cultural codes which is information that has to do with people at particular times and places. The fourth area is of 'Stories told and Presented' which when moving from novel to film, help move spectators from a purely representational mode to an order of the operable. This area explores the differences between the two language systems of the novel and the film, and how one works more symbolically and the other through an interaction of codes. The novel can place its reader in the present, past and future tense, but within the medium of the cinema, the film and its images up on the screen can only place the spectator in the present (29).

These four significant areas of exploration that Brian McFarlane expresses is a fascinating perspective on the different adaptations between novel and film. Clowes' graphic novel of *Ghost World* seems to favor its storyboard images over written words, and so its visual codes whether spatial or linear seem to lean more towards the film form than the literary form. Because the graphic novel is all images, the spectator is seeing the illustrations in the present tense and besides a few flashbacks or dream sequences, there are no past or future tense images.

Ghost World's adaptation from Clowes' graphic novel to director Terry Zwigoff's film brings to mind Judith Maine's theory on the private sphere of novels and the public sphere of films. Zwigoff's cinematic adaptation of *Ghost World* is a much different story about Enid (Thora Birch) and Becky (Scarlet Johansson). In the film Enid doesn't get to go to college either but the reason is drastically different. For instance, in the novel she simply doesn't pass the test. That isn't very surprising since in the novel Enid is never shown studying for the test, so we immediately assume her failure was the direct result of her own actions. And yet in the public sphere of the film Enid is let off the hook, as she fails to go to college because of a failing grade by her art teacher (Illeana Douglas). Instead of feeling that Enid brought her own failure upon herself, we instead feel that her failure was unfairly thrust upon her by outside forces which were beyond her control. In the private sphere of the novel Enid has full control of her destiny, in the public sphere of the film she does not.

And yet the major change between the novel and the film is Enid and Becky's complex relationship. In Clowes' graphic novel, he mostly focuses on the intense friendship that Enid and Becky share and the way they sometimes act with one another leaves their sexuality up for interpretation. In one part of the novel Enid grabs Becky around the waist and says, "I don't see anything wrong with us always staying together. Sometimes I wonder if maybe I really am a lesbo....I mean, don't worry or anything" (74). And yet for the film Zwigoff strays away from such themes and instead has Enid pursue a relationship with Seymour (Steve Buscemi), a man twice her age. Suddenly Enid and Becky's relationship is pushed aside and the film begins to concentrate on their relationship. This drastic shift from a close same-sex friendship with slight lesbian undertones to a more traditional heterosexual romance is evidence on what is more acceptable in the private sphere of the novel and the public sphere of the film.