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Film and Literature

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Final Response Essay

What [Jean-Luc Godard's](#) adaptation of Alberto Moravia's novel *Contempt* teaches us is a great deal about how we take in various mediums of adaptation, and what can be lost or gained throughout the process. Godard keeps the basic story of power relations in the film industry intact, and instead makes slight changes on two of the three men who are attempting to make a film adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey*. In the novel the movie producer is named Battista, who is described as an overweight Italian man with several nicknames like the big ape (78). In Godard's adaptation Battista is transformed into a man named Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance) an arrogant and cocky American producer with a lack of artistic talent and creative ideas. In the novel the director is a German man by the name of Rheingold, with Moravia describing his directing ability as "not in the same class as the Pabsts and the Langs" (79). In the film this German director is played by the legendary German director Fritz Lang who is in fact playing himself.

In the novel even though the three men understand one another's words, they still find it difficult to communicate with each other. For the film, Godard brilliantly creates a language barrier between the three men, with subtle touches of cultural differences: The intellectual

German, the money hungry American and the romantically tortured Frenchman. Since these three men do not speak the same language, they ultimately have a translator named Francesca, (Giorgia Moll) who for some reason or another never quite translates the correct message between the three men. This language barrier and inability to translate every little nuance from one language to another presents to us all that is good and bad when regarding the adaptation between two different sources. For instance, during Francesca's translations some specific things are either emphasized or explored while others are entirely ignored and never even brought up. Like in any adaptation it is nearly impossible to be able to recreate exactly what is printed on the page, and even if there was a way to do that, many cultural elements would still get lost in the creative process.

Lange seems to hold the most power when it comes to directing *The Odyssey* and it is probably because Lang is able to fluently speak English, French, and German, without the need of Francesca's translations, while possessing all that is needed to comprehend each language that is spoken to him. There is a classic moment in the film where Prokosch angrily protests that what he sees on the screen is not what is in the script and Lang condescendingly responds by saying, "because in the script, it is written, and on the screen it's pictures... motion pictures it's called." This sarcastic line of dialogue is a very conscious line that Godard is purposely pointing out to the spectators who would perceive his own film as an unfaithful adaptation of Moravia's novel. This commentary on successful and non successful adaptations is exactly what Godard is attempting to get through to the audience, in that an adaptation is not necessarily a recreation of another work artist's work, but a birth of a different work altogether.

These ideas on adaptation are what Robert Stam is trying to present in his article *Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation*. Stam states that we need to be less concerned with

unacknowledged hierarchies between each medium, and that Dudley Andrew's ideas of fidelity can be highly problematic. "First, it is questionable whether strict fidelity is even possible. A counter-view would insist that an adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium" (55). Stam also brings up the fact that by adapting one form of text to another does not necessarily mean that it needs to be an exact duplication, and that to try and achieve a perfect word for word adaptation could weaken the overall adaptation. "The question of fidelity ignores the wider question: Fidelity to what? Is the filmmaker being faithful to the plot in every detail? That might mean a thirty-hour version of war and peace" (57).

What Stam seems to be suggesting is that we shouldn't necessarily go see a movie to re-experience everything we felt with its original source. Instead we should go to have such wonderful ideas be expanded upon in new and creative ways. Every form of medium has its own different strengths and weaknesses but in the end they all have the same basic intentions, which is to tell a great story. Unfortunately, much of the public does not understand that, and so many people get disappointed or even downright furious when a novel they adore doesn't show up exactly how they pictured when watching it on the silver screen. Godard knew just that when adapting the novel of *Contempt* to the cinema, realizing that each medium had its own respective materials that could be used for its own specific artistic expression. "The novel has a single material of expression, the written word, whereas the film has at least five tracks: moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials. In this sense, the cinema has not lesser, but rather greater resources for expression than the novel, and this independent of what actual filmmakers have done with these resources" (59).

In Godard's film adaptation of *Contempt*, if Godard decided to adapt the book literally word for word and simply not take advantage of the wonderful attributes that the cinema had to

offer, how do you think the film would have turned out? It's impossible to say, but what we can see are the inventive and wonderful ideas Godard created exclusively for the film version, ultimately making it as effective or even more effective than the novel. For instance, Godard's brilliant use of visual metaphors of Greek mythology taken from the novel's original theme of art imitating life, which include Prokosch's red Alfa Romeo sweeping in like Zeus' chariot to take Brigitte Bardot away; Prokosch hurling a film canister in disgust imitating a Greek discus thrower; the bath towel being worn by Paul suggesting a Roman toga; and the classic opening sequence in which the CinemaScope camera (which Lang proudly states that he hates) tilts down to look at the audience, similar to a one-eyed Polyphemus.

Godard also used outside influences either personal or business-wise and creatively interweaved them into the story. For instance, the tension between artist and corporatism which were adapted from the novel run parallel to Godard and the problems he had with his producers, especially when viewing an early rough cut of the film in which there was not one nude scene of actress Brigitte Bardot. Godard stated to them, "Hadn't they ever bothered to see a Godard film?" Legendary cinematographer Raoul Coutard stated that the film was actually a love letter apology to Godard's wife, (their marriage was deteriorating during the filming of *Contempt*) and at one point in the film Godard even seems to dress Bardot to resemble her, as Bardot dons a black wig which closely resembles the iconic hair-style of Anna Karina. Besides Raoul Coutard's gorgeous cinematography and lush primary colors, what's most remembered about the film is the masterful soundtrack by George Delerue. This classic score gives *Contempt* its full haunting effect as it has a tragic and sad underlining to the music that really represents the tragic relationship that is slowly unfolding, and adds a poetic power to the film that the book could never achieve.

And so, why do adaptations fail, and why do we feel the need to describe them in success and failure terms? The obvious reason for this can be that many people develop a personal connection to the original material and so they want that experience to be duplicated when adapted to a different text. Most people wouldn't waste their time going to watch a movie that was adapted from a source they didn't care anything about, and so they develop a deep and personal connection to the material, and expect to equally like everything else that is closely associated with it. What I've learned throughout this semester was how to move way beyond the thoughts of fidelity and come to the realization that it's not wise to expect that one form of adaptation should be exactly identical to its processor. In many ways adaptations will always fail because they try to please everyone, and most of the time end up pleasing no one. For instance, if a million people read the same novel, no two reader's vision of what the character looks like, or its setting of the story are going to be exactly the same. Because of this it is impossible to please everyone and it makes a successful adaptation nearly an impossible task to achieve.