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Film and Literature

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Mini-Essay Number Four

Daniel Woodrell's and Debra Granik's adaptation of *Winter's Bone* can help us understand the nature of adaptation and of the industries cultural demands within the marketplace of consumerism. Judith Mayne explores her Marxist and feminist point of view, in which the film and the novel can function as an object in a system of capitalist, and within that system they can communicate to the public a standard of living and a form of ideology. Mayne writes that within the world of the novel reading is essentially a private experience, unlike the medium of the cinema which is much more of a public experience. "The class dimensions of consumerism were essential to the reification of the private sphere. An imaginary ideal of homogeneity was put forth, whereby working class and middle-class aspirations could be united around the pursuit of leisure and good" (278-79).

What Mayne seems to be saying is that they're specific themes and subjects that are acceptable or not acceptable within each particular medium, and these decisions to what is acceptable can be traced to products in the market place. There are several specific changes that were made for the novel and film adaptations of *Winter's Bone*, because they're certain elements

within its story that are appropriate and not appropriate for the private sphere of the novel, and the public sphere of the film.

For instance, the book is much more excessive with drug use, as many of the characters do drugs including the main protagonist Ree Dolly. Ree smokes marijuana regularly throughout the story, as there is one particular sequence in which she and her best friend Gail are high on dope while Gail drives around with husband Ned and her baby in the vehicle. In the private sphere of the novel, the controversial themes of drug use is more acceptable because the drug use isn't made public to a large audience, but instead made privately between the characters and the reader. Granik's film adaptation of the story dismissed much of the drug use, and only referenced it when referring back to Ree's father Jessup, or when it becomes beneficial to the story.

Another artistic change that is made between the novel and the film are the visual appearances of its characters. Within the private sphere of the novel it is easier for the author to create character's that are described for the reader as unattractive or unrepresentable. Unfortunately in the cinema most commercial movies hire people who are very attractive and desirable to look at. In Woodrell's novel Ree is described as a brunette who is more cruder and less attractive than the blonde that actress Jennifer Lawrence presents in the film. For example, there is a sequence in the novel where Ree teaches her two brothers a disgusting method of nose blowing without the use of a handkerchief, which is something we don't see in the film.

One of the most obvious visual changes in looks is with the character of Tear Drop the method addicted uncle who was described in the novel as a badly burned meth addict who is missing an ear from a recent meth lab explosion. When adapting his character to the public world of the cinema Granik chose to cast John Hawkes for the character of Teardrop, without all the

facial scars and tattoos described in the novel and his ear perfectly intact. The reason for these changes is because within the public world of the cinema, audiences have a particular expectation on how an actor or actress should look or be presented, and if these expectations are not met, most movie watchers feel disappointed or unsatisfied.

One of the most controversial themes for the public sphere within the cinema is sex, and so it's not surprising it is also one of the major changes made when adapting *Winter's Bone* from the novel to the movie screen. The rape that is mentioned in the novel is completely taken out when adapted to the movie version. In the movie Ree seems to have a very antagonistic attitude towards Little Arthur and the reasons for this are left ambiguous. The novel clears up why she has such feelings towards him, as the novel explains in detail that Ree was fed hallucinogenic mushrooms and raped by him in the middle of the woods when she was just a young child. When adapting the back story of Ree's childhood rape to the movie screen, Granik wisely decided to completely remove that section from the story.

But the most obvious omission was the sexual relationship between Ree and her best friend Gail. In the film adaptation they're slight hints of how close their relationship is with one another, as Gail is shown to stay numerous nights over at Ree's home. But besides from that, the film completely removes any obvious suggestions that the two have a sexual lesbian relationship with one another. In the novel their sexual attraction for one another is pretty explicit, but director Granik felt that Ree and Gail's burgeoning sexual exploration would have been extremely distracting for the film adaptation, and removed that sub-plot entirely.

Even though several changes like drug use, physical appearances and sexuality were greatly changed or toned down when *Winter's Bone* was adapted from novel to film, I believe

the adaptation of the film was entirely successful. The reasons for this are because when Granik adapted the story to the screen she seemed to bring equivalence to the spirit and form of the novel. Referencing back to Andre Bazin's theory of Adaptation and of his pyramid of equivalence, the narrative themes of man vs. society, man vs. law, and a strong female lead character was left intact when adapted from the novel to the film. Because of Mayne's theory on private novels and public films, it would have been commercially and maybe even artistically a mistake to adapt everything intact from the private sphere of the novel to the public sphere of the cinema, because maybe audiences wouldn't have accepted in the media of the film what could be easier to consume within the media of the novel.

It would be a hard sell for movie audiences to want to root for a young woman who is visually unattractive, actively participates in drug use and has a sexual lesbian relationship with her married girlfriend. (It wouldn't bother me but I'm not the mainstream movie watcher.) Mayne writes, "The movies had an equally important function in the maintenance of the ideal of the spectacle sphere as a privileged, separate realm...a vehicle for consumerism and a link to the narrative tradition" (281). What could obviously work in the world of the novel might not successfully work in the world of the movie, and despite several changes between each form, as long as the spirit of the story is intact, the meaning can be equally successful. *Winter's Bone* did just that.