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From Text to Film or Film to Text? A Reevaluation of Adaptation on the Example of Peter Handke and Wim Wenders

In its rejection of "Papa's Cinema," as stated in the famous Oberhausen Manifesto (1962), Young German Cinema–and later New German Cinema–established a new program of aesthetics critical of the Nazi past. Unquestionably, Wim Wenders stands out among other German postwar film directors for his unique style, not to mention collaborative efforts with the Austrian writer Peter Handke. Despite a considerable amount of scholarship on Handke and Wenders, it is refreshing to encounter a new perspective on the topic of literary adaptation. *Wim Wenders and Peter Handke: Collaboration, Adaptation, Recomposition*, by Martin Brady and Joanne Leal, reassesses Wenders's collaborative period with Handke (1969-1987) as an underappreciated source of insight into both artists' creative development, oeuvres, and mutual influence. For Wenders, this meant a shift from image-making to storytelling, whereas Handke experimented with "cinematic" literature. Brady and Leal argue, against the grain of current scholarship, that this period saw Wenders's experimentation and Handke's aesthetics transformed: the authors show how multiple media are incorporated into and problematized in both writing and in film by Wenders and Handke, and how this resulted in changed programs of aesthetics in their native medium beyond the period of collaboration. Importantly, this book reevaluates commonly held views of Wenders's films during this period but also the evolution of Handke's literature, and therefore would be of interest to Germany film and literary scholars, as well as film and media studies specialists who research adaptation and intermediality. Throughout *Wim Wenders and Peter Handke*, care is taken to expound upon the many divergences between text and film, which signal a departure from conventional literary adaptations and make a case for Wenders's films as independent works of art despite their roots in Handke's work.

Although some of the themes and analyses in this study will appear to experts to revisit previous scholarship on Wenders and Handke, the focus on Wenders's experimental approaches to literary adaptation as prefiguring the emergence of intermediality as a critical tool for analysis adds to the already significant body of research. Foregrounding the "inherited media of cinema" (i.e., photography, sound, music, painting, poetry) and taking as their point of departure an essay by New German Cinema directors Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz, and Wilfried Reinke, Brady and Leal argue that Handke's and Wenders's collaborative works are modernist, have no ideological underpinnings, remain "outside any dialectical configuration," and explore intermediality in both film and literature, and, moreover, "[the works] exhibit a rigorously critical take on image-making, linguistic expression, and narrative (or story-telling)," which the authors describe as "recompositional" (p. 21). This term connotes the manner in which literature and film interact and, in this way, are reshaped, especially through the process of adaptation. Brady and Leal's extensive discussion in their introduction of "recomposition" situates their study as redefining approaches to adaptation in order to appreciate the differences of the literary "pretexts" and the filmic "recomposition," thereby leading the way to a new understanding of intermediality. Unfortunately, the authors do not clearly lay out their use of the term "recomposition" within the body of theoretical work on intermediality. This is a missed opportunity given the study's high relevance and important contribution to the discourse, particularly in film and literary studies approaches to intermedial configurations.[1] Situating Handke's and Wenders's work on a continuum between Carl Theodor von Dreyer's *Vampyr* (*Vampire*, 1932) and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Von heute auf Morgen* (*From Today to Tomorrow*, 1996), the

study presents a convincing case for their influence on Handke and Wenders, further situating them within a historical discourse on film and intermediality.[2] What is provocative here is their claim of German film studies and film and media theory's continued conservative stance towards film adaptations as derivative, which can be found in the critical literature on Wenders's films.[3]

Opening their study with a discussion of the genesis of New German Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and the discourse on film as a "mixed medium," the authors call into question the stance taken by filmmakers of New German Cinema in the *Literaturverfilmungskrise*, a debate about literary adaptations and the relationship of literature and film in critical German cinema. Given New German Cinema's predilection for literary adaptation and the common assumption that literary adaptations are derivative and thus require analysis grounded in their literary pre-texts, this new interpretation, in five chapters of varying length and analytical depth, challenges the notion of unidirectional influence from literary work to filmic adaptation, ultimately arguing for a shift from interdependence to Wenders's creative independence and restoration of film's media-critical capacity. The book is logically organized with chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 examining collaborative works based on each of four models of adaptation and chapter 3 comparing independent projects of Handke and Wenders in order to show that, even when working apart, their work exhibits many common themes and aesthetic concerns.

Chapter 1 explores the initial contact and collaboration between Handke and Wenders, while explicating their radical differences in artistic approaches. Although recognizing Handke as the more accomplished artist at the time of their first meeting, Brady and Leal persuasively challenge the notion of a mentor relationship assumed to exist between Handke and Wenders. Here the authors argue that their unusual collaborative projects contributed to the divergence of their styles from pre- to post-collaboration. In particular, the films *Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse* (*Chronicle of Current Events*, 1971) and *Silver City Re-visited* by Handke and Wenders, respectively, around the time of their first project together, *3 American LPs*, already manifest themes, stylistic features (e.g., intertextuality, self-reflexivity), and theoretical stances that would appear throughout their oeuvres.

In chapter 2 of the study, Handke's *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty* (1970)–"adapted" to film in 1972 by Wenders–plays the central role in defining the relationship between the successful writer and emerging film director. Wenders is quoted as saying that his understanding of the novel and its filmic qualities led him to produce the film, albeit with vastly different emphases. This chapter underscores the intermedial styles of both writer and film director, and begins to make the case for "recomposition" as a useful and needed term in the study of film adaptations. Furthermore, the discussion of film genres and defying the viewer's horizon of expectations is particularly useful in understanding and, indeed, rescuing Wenders's film from its negative detractors.

Chapter 3 examines the "construction of selfhood and the role of writing and image making in that process," as well as the "subject's relationship to reality and the ways in which a perception of that reality is mediated," among other topics (p. 165). According to the analysis of Handke's *Short Letter, Long Farewell* and Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* in chapter 3, emphases on linguistic construction of reality (Handke) and formalist aesthetics (Wenders) are discarded in favor of greater focus on subjectivity, which leads to a more cinematic literature and narrative cinema, respectively.

The fourth chapter investigates the culmination of their work together on the example of *Wrong Move*. Although, as discussed in the fifth and final chapter, Handke provided a creative text as the basis for Wenders's *Wings of Desire*, thus representing a final collaborative effort, *Wrong Move* marked the beginning of the end of their cross-pollination and a widening gap in their artistic visions: namely, their understanding of "the relationship between politics and poetry" (p. 201). Because Handke ultimately wrote the script for Wenders's "adaptation" of the former's novel, Brady and Leal are able to tease out moments of artistic difference when Wenders's film follows and diverges from its pre-text, thus providing many examples of Wenders's critical interrogation of the "inherited media" of film and its liberation from postmodernist and poststructuralist discourses.

Brady and Leal's study differs from previous scholarship in a few significant ways. First, it takes an intermedial approach to analyzing literary adaptation on the example of Peter Handke's and Wim Wenders's collaborations and independent projects. Performing close readings of four collaborative films of this period, which includes *3 amerikanische LPs* (1969), *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* / *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty* (novel 1970 / film 1972), *Falsche Bewegung* / *Wrong Move* (1975), and *Der Himmel über Berlin* / *Wings of Desire* (1987), this study argues persuasively for the centrality of these works and collaboration for understanding their respective oeuvres. Brady and Leal illuminate the ex-

tent of intellectual and creative cross-pollination and influence through thematic and stylistic concerns in these four films, as well as Handke's and Wenders's independent projects, thus reconciling their collaborative works within each artist's creative output. Second, framing their analysis within the notion of intermediality, Brady and Leal expand the scope of their project beyond collaborative films and their pre-texts, incorporating critical essays, film reviews, interviews, and director commentaries, as well as literature and film produced before, during, and after this period by Handke and Wenders. With such breadth, Brady and Leal manage to uncover extensive intertextuality in their works, draw parallels in terms of their influences (e.g., Dreyer, Jean-Luc Godard, Straub-Huillet, Dashiell Hammett), and offer a compelling new insight into–especially–Wenders's transformation into a storyteller. Third, taking Simone Malaguti's recent monograph as a point of departure, their "close readings" of Wenders's four films use her four types of adaptation to argue that a new term is needed for his and Handke's unique collaborations ("recompositions"), which they define as "the process whereby a filmmaker exposes a film's 'inherited media' ... in order to reconfigure cinema's 'synthetic multiplicity of signifiers' and exploit the potential for 'disunity and disjunction' this multiplicity implies" (p. 24).[4] Fourth, working from film studies and theories of adaptation–notably Dudley Andrew, Robert Stam, Brian McFarlane, and James Naremore–Brady and Leal demonstrate that, unlike his peers in Young and New German Cinema, Wenders's films concerned themselves less with ideological Brechtian "New Wave" aesthetics and more with "expand[ing] intermediality beyond the literary to encompass a wider spectrum of interactions and exchanges" (p. 21). Moreover, the authors position this book as a case study for adaptation in all its guises within one creative partnership, which "exhibit[s] a rigorously critical take on image-making, linguistic expression, and narrative (or story-telling)." Thus, Wenders's and Handke's work together is restored to a place of prominence in their respective oeuvres, and achieves a lasting importance for the intersection of literature and film.

Do Brady and Leal offer a compelling case for the significance of Wenders's and Handke's collaboration, and do they contribute anything new to scholarship on these artists? I would suggest that they do. In their close readings of the four films, Brady and Leal, though at times not clearly explaining their "textual" (i.e., literary and filmic) evidence, uncover a consistent program of intermedial concerns shared by Handke and Wenders, which they work through in both film and literature, incorporating brief discussions of Handke's films and how they exemplify the same theoretical issues with text and image found in his writing. By tracing influences from literature and film in Handke's texts and Wenders's films–the discussion of *Wrong Move* in chapter 4 being especially convincing–the study shows how their work's thematic concerns and focus on subjectivity provide a link between politics of the students movement in the 1960s and the withdrawal into the personal (*Neue Subjektivität*) of the 1970s, while arguing for the power–and indeed, what they see as the rightful place–of modernist post-Brechtian cinema in German film studies. Handke's and Wenders's work does not specifically espouse ideology of the period, but, as the study shows, it cannot be seen as entirely disconnected from the same concerns that New German Cinema directors faced. Their work is timeless precisely because it tackles general issues of aesthetics and film's critical capacity in a postmodern and post-Brechtian world.

In terms of whether this study contributes to existing scholarship on Handke and Wenders, the detailed close readings offer new insights about adaptation and the problematization of intermediality, while persuasively illustrating the inverse relationship of adaptation and collaboration: the more collaborative the effort between the author and filmmaker, the less adaptational the film, and vice versa. In chapter 2 on *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty*, Brady and Leal add to the scholarship by revealing how Wenders was able to transcend the failure of linguistic expression to escape extreme subjectivity in the written word through his use of image and a self-reflexive undermining of point-of-view shots, a feature of film that sets it apart from literature. Another particularly salient part of their analysis is the disputation of each artis"s comments about their own work through close readings, holding both accountable for their contradictions and inconsistencies. Certainly, Brady and Leal are not the first to note many of the issues raised about Handke's and Wenders's works (e.g., modernist/postmodernist split, problematization of image and text), for which their extensive citation of print and other media sources is notable and helpful, but their research and close readings offer a very convincing reinterpretation of the artists' collaboration as pivotal for their styles and careers. Furthermore, they place both within a creative trajectory of recomposition in film history, beginning with Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), continuing with their four collaborative films (1969-1974), and ending with Straub-Huillet's *Von Heute auf Morgen* (1996). Such a positioning, other than their explanation of how they were influential for Handke and Wenders and de-

spite their apparent intermediality, appears somewhat tenuous, however, considering the large temporal gaps between films and given the large corpus of German film.

Brady and Leal's book goes beyond important contributions to scholarship on Wenders and Handke: it generates new insights for German film and literary scholars alike, inasmuch as it challenges the one-sided perception of Handke's and Wenders's collaborative efforts, and, in particular, exposes the underappreciated productive tensions underlying these formative years for both while offering a plausible explanation of Wenders's and Handke's overlapping and divergent development as artists. Beyond German studies, however, this project makes an important contribution to the critical discourse on intermediality and adaptation through its unique case study of four different types of adaptation of one author's works by one filmmaker.

Notes

[1]. Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermédialités* 6 (2005): 43-64.

[2]. Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Daniele Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[3]. Peter Beicken and Robert Phillip Kolker, *The Films of Wim Wenders: Cinema as Vision and Desire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden, eds., *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative and the Postmodern Condition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997); and Simone Malaguti. *Wim Wenders' Filme und ihre intermediale Beziehung zur Literatur Peter Handkes* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008).

[4]. Simone Malaguti, *Wim Wenders' Filme und ihre intermediale Beziehung zur Literatur Peter Handkes* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008).

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