

Spring 2005

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Recommended Citation

Nosek, Jason (2005) "Grayscale Chessboard," *ESSAI*: Vol. 3, Article 26.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol3/iss1/26>

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Grayscale Chessboard

by Jason Nosek

(Honors English 154, Speech 120)

The Assignment: Select a novel that has a film version. Compare and contrast the novel to its cinematic counterpart.

In chess, opponents attempt to whittle down each other's pieces until they can achieve victory. Yet neither side is evil, they are merely two powers using all means and moves necessary to win. They are playing this game and making these moves because they believe that they are better and furthermore, wiser than each other. Kurt Vonnegut brilliantly carved faces onto these chess pieces in his novel Mother Night. Visages slightly mottled, these pieces make their way onto celluloid in Gordon's film version of this novel. While the film is certainly different than the novel, this faithful adaptation retains the themes and central question of the original work. Events and objects are added, characters and their actions are slightly altered, some of Vonnegut's ideas are removed though the main themes stay; yet as a whole, the film is a success.

The most obvious of all of the changes made, was the adding of several objects and sequences. Surprisingly, most are relevant additions; only one change truly altered the characters. Very few films work well with added scenes, so it is quite amazing that the scenes added in "Mother Night" not only worked well, but added true depth to the film as well as offering more for the audience to ponder. An effective and offsetting scene is near the end of the film, where the protagonist Campbell somewhat unintentionally walks into a room in which old broadcasts of himself (as a Nazi) are being screened. In the novel, Campbell was a radio personality who preached and prophesized about the evil of Jews. During this scene of the film however, Campbell was doing a television broadcast. Flickering images of the young Campbell spewing Anti-Semitic hate were projected upon a much older and disillusioned Campbell. The effect is as shocking for the audience as it seems to be for Campbell. This raises the question central to the work, which is: even if Campbell did this for the "right" reason, to further the American cause, is it morally right? This one of the most powerful moments in the film and was entirely the director's creation. Soon after that scene passes, another addition is made. Campbell's friend Kraft, who is a Russian spy, says that their actions are not who they are, but what is going on around them. This furthers the aforementioned chess theme as well as the central question about responsibility. The men are pawns, manipulated by their respective countries, rather than their own beliefs. This addition supports Vonnegut's theme, and thus benefits the film. Conversely, there are additions that hinder the film and limit the depth of the characters. The most offensive is the love between Resi (Campbell's wife's sister) and the antihero Campbell. The most superfluous scene is when the two are lying in bed, and Campbell tells his new interest "I'm going to write again." This line mutes the pain and emptiness that Campbell still retains from the war and the loss of his wife, Helga. More importantly though, this line makes the protagonist two-dimensional, in that his cavernous soul can be easily filled by a woman. This is an attempt at a sub-plot that ultimately fails.

The most symbolic and significant addition to the film is the last. In both the prose and film, Campbell extinguishes his faltering flame by hanging himself in prison. About this, Vonnegut is nondescript. Gordon on the contrary, inserts a valid symbol into this otherwise simple scene. When Campbell hangs himself, he does it with nothing other than his very own ink ribbon. The hanging itself is undoubtedly the most powerful moment in both mediums of film and novel. It is enhanced in film by the idea that he wrote his broadcasts on a typewriter, using ink to express thoughts that may, in essence, have resulted in the deaths of thousands, possibly millions of Jews.

Though none of the characters are changed entirely, some of their thoughts and motives have been altered. Resi is the character most changed, her actions in the film all seem to be guided by said sub-plot, love. In the film Gordon has Resi poisoning herself when Campbell deprives her of his undying love. Thus, her suicide is much more of a romantic notion. In the novel, Resi is surrounded by the American agents who are about to send her back to Russia, which would mean death (166). Also, in the novel she did not lead on that if Campbell did not confess his eternal love, then she would commit suicide. With these elements added, the text character Resi seems much more pragmatic than her romantic filmic counterpart. An unseen character is also altered; that character is Adolf Eichmann. Campbell wrote, "I offer my opinion that Eichmann cannot distinguish between right and wrong- that not only right and wrong, but truth and falsehood, hope and despair...are all processed like birdshot through a bugle"(123-24). Campbell goes on to write that Eichmann made a joke about the six million Jews he "murdered"(125). The film makes Eichmann's comment not a joke at all, but rather something for Campbell to ponder. This seemingly small alteration actually has a grand effect on the situation altogether. The presence of Eichmann is not coincidental or comic. Eichmann is a foil of Campbell, because Campbell *does* know the difference between right and wrong. To make both men of sound mind misleads the audience into believing that all men are the same, and all should be punished equally. Changing these characters definitely detracted from the work as a whole.

Another change made in adapting this novel to film was the removal of many of Vonnegut's personal ideas and reoccurring themes. Granted, these do not detract from the story arc or any of the characters, but some of the color is lost. Throughout Vonnegut's body of work, there are many reoccurring themes; one of these is his objection for devoting one's self wholly to a political or religious belief. This is present in the film through Campbell's actions and thoughts, but many key lines pertaining to this, which would reveal Vonnegut's beliefs, are not in the film. In the novel, Campbell says, "I had hoped as a broadcaster, to be merely ludicrous, but this is a hard world to be ludicrous in, with so many human beings so reluctant to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate. So many people *wanted* to believe me! Say what you will about the sweet miracle of unquestioning faith, I consider a capacity of it terrifying and absolutely vile"(120). While the film as a whole does allude to this theme, some of its power, and Vonnegut's conviction is lost by removing key lines like this one. Another theme found in much of Vonnegut's work, which is brought up in the film but not fully explored is his fear of conformity and socialism/communism. In the novel, when talking about Campbell's literature, he is told a Soviet plagiarized his work. The conversation that ensues speaks volumes about Vonnegut:

“I’m glad about Bodovskov,” [Campbell] said. “I’m glad somebody got to live like an artist with what I once had. You said he got arrested and tried?”

“And shot,” said Wirtanen

“For plagiarism?” I said.

“For originality,” said Wirtanen. “Plagiarism is the silliest of misdemeanors. What harm is there in writing what’s already been written? Real originality is a capital crime, often calling for cruel and unusual punishment....”(151)

This is a sub-plot, which is not brought up in the film likely for the sake of running time. This does not affect the story as a whole, and because the film is a separate entity, the choice is legitimate, just a letdown for fans of Vonnegut.

Despite the loss of sub-plots and their themes, the key themes of the story-arc of the novel are translated to the film well. One of these is the central question of the work; has Campbell truly been committing these crimes, these murders, even if his heart was not in it? The novel brings about a grey area, questioning morality and posing this question about truth and guilt. On a side note, filming Campbell and the war criminal prison in black and white enhances this question, subjecting the viewer to visual shades of gray. There is not one particular area where this film falters or directly addresses this question, and the subtlety in asking this question is a success. Another key theme and motif that is well represented in the film is the chessboard. Slight changes were made in the dialogue and pacing, but it does not affect the theme as a whole. Campbell makes a chess set and he and Kraft play constantly. The irony here, of course is that they are not playing, they are merely pawns in a much larger, global or perhaps even cosmic game of chess. They are both spies controlled by their respective governments, and are forced to make certain moves. As the movie progresses, more pieces emerge, Resi is a pawn, Wirtanen is a higher piece, but still he does not completely control his fate. Perhaps the characters that are playing them are not exactly playing either. Ultimately, Vonnegut is playing the game and in doing so, he is addressing government control and ideas of fate. The pawn is part of the chess motif that is brought up later in the film as well. In the novel, Campbell fumbles in his pocket and thinks about what is in it. “It was the pawn from the chess set...”(183). So once again, this motif is brought about and the reader is prodded to think about how Campbell himself is a pawn. This theme is masterfully conveyed in both mediums, and in that regard, the film is a success.

This faithful adaptation of Mother Night does work, and Gordon makes it work well. He managed to keep the story nearly whole and characters relatively the same. Perhaps the best thing he did was add his own flair to the film. The film projected on Campbell, the ink ribbon, the black and white scenes, etc, these things all add depth to the film and visually challenge the viewer to ponder questions of morality, guilt, and ethics. Despite removing a few sub-plots and some very good dialogue, the film is still effective in posing questions and playing on dark humor. Gordon achieves this by adding his style and removing the unnecessary material. The film is a success because of this balance.

Works Cited

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- Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. Mother Night. New York: Laurel, 1966.