Remodelling homologies
Adaptation between betrayal and incommensurability

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The November 1997 issue of Index magazine featured a rather unusual piece by avantgardist John Jesurun, which apparently had surprised even the editors – and this despite having commissioned the contribution themselves. Building on the already troubled conversion from James M. Cain’s 1941 novel Mildred Pierce to the 1945 film produced by Jerry Wald via multiple screenwriters and many more rewrites, this essay approaches the theme of betrayal so conspicuous in both works less from the narrative angle than from a processual angle inspired by the principle of incommensurability. To this end, it juxtaposes the ‘classical’ adaptation from the Hollywood studio era with Jesurun’s experimental reimagining of the betrayal theme as a homology-based remodelling.

Keywords: adaptation, homology, incommensurability, John Jesurun, Mildred Pierce

Performance, rather than fidelity, is their goal.
(Kenneth D. Forbus)

1. Enthusiastic stealing

In my hometown of Antwerp, there once lived a rather famous artist whose renown and productivity were directly related to his business model. In his spacious atelier the baroque painter Pieter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) supervised scores of disciples such as Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678) or Anthony (‘Antoon’) Van Dyck (1599–1641) to whom he ‘subcontracted’ various parts of projects to be executed in accordance with a common core of his own aesthetic first principles. To Rubens’s contemporaries, this was nothing very extraordinary. Artistic borrowing was de rigueur, and little or no attention was paid to essentially romantic notions like originality.
or ownership while quality and craftsmanship clearly took precedence. After all, Shakespeare, too, had been an unrepentant adaptor of older sources of inspiration, while prior to the Renaissance artists hardly ever even signed their work, and until the eighteenth century the principle of imitation constituted nothing less than “the lifeblood of western literature, drama, art, and music” (Beulow 1990: 119). During the first half of the last century, the modernist poet T.S. Eliot moreover reminded us that, despite romantic conceptions of the ‘genius artist’ and the advent of copyright law, artists are still stealing from one another – and enthusiastically so, for reading his famous Waste Land (1922) “is also to read Shakespeare, Chaucer, Webster, and many others” (Moss 2005: G2/2). As he himself famously put it in his 1921 collection of musings on poetry and criticism The Sacred Wood, “Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different” (1921: 114). Finally, another ninety years later leading adaptation-scholar Linda Hutcheon went on record with the claim that, to her, the principle’s chief attraction lies with its “innate ability to undermine existing cultural hierarchies” (2011: 217).

In similar fashion, still, the November 1997 edition of the New York-centred Indie culture magazine Index featured a rather unusual piece by avant-garde theatre- and filmmaker John Jesurun which apparently had surprised even the editors despite having commissioned it themselves. In effect, they introduced this contribution, entitled ‘Mildred Pierce remake/remodel’, as follows:

From time to time, we ask someone: ‘If you could re-make any film, what would it be, and how would you do it differently?’ And until we asked John Jesurun, no one had ever written all-new dialogue for the original film.

(qtd. in Jesurun 1997: 58)

Not content with just new dialogue, Jesurun effectively took the eponymous heroine from noir novelist James M. Cain’s Mildred Pierce out of 1940s California and placed her in the present day on the south shore of Long Island, NY, so as to convey at once “the geographical nearness of a dreary working class shore town and the relative glamour of the upscale Fire Island Pines” (Jesurun 1997: 58). Such, indeed, is Jesurun’s atmosphere-driven reconception of the material that his chief aesthetic objective seemed to steer clear of factual ‘accuracy’ or narrative representativeness in favour of a form of paradoxical coherence that does not rely on direct comparison or compatibility, which I will refer to as ‘homology-based incommensurability’. For, like the ‘hardboiled’ novel it dates back to, and the noir thriller it more directly stems from, this complete structural makeover-cum-compression into three “crucial scenes” and six statements, despite appearances, could actually count as just as ‘faithful’ to its illustrious origins for communicating by tone. And even if this might look like a superficial exercise in triviality to ‘fidelity’-apologists
still unburdened by the “element of je ne sais quoi” (Elliott 2003: 137) in their own thinking, this essay will argue that by positioning adaptation in between betrayal and incommensurability, an approach to adaptation practice can be constituted which is capable of attaining a heuristic reach far wider than static comparative postures could ever aspire to.

Indeed, if we follow the basic tenet of cognitive science that “Cognition equals recognition” (Defays 1997: 131) and apply it to the adaptation principle, the importance for adaptations to be recognized as adaptations immediately transpires. However, such perspective in itself does little to acknowledge adaptations’ inherently multi-modal character, and hence questions as to why, when, and how different strands of influence come to converge in the form of an adaptation remain unanswered. What it does reveal, though, is that adaptations rely on the cognitive concretization of heterogeneous impulses, and as such constitute analogous relations that ‘connect’ before they ‘confuse’. Our faculty to think analogically, after all, is a “neurological fact” (Eco 1986: 129) that sidesteps causal limitations while recuperating and repurposing the ‘slippage’ from the unforeseen into applied adjustments. Additionally, as French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour argued, ‘meaning’ is the socialized product of individual associations between entities which themselves do not necessarily form coherent unities but are nevertheless interpreted by means of momentary relations (2005: 64–65). Bortolotti and Hutcheon made a similar claim for adaptation studies with an argument centred around the notion of ‘homology’ as an interdisciplinary integration of analogous impulses (2007: 444). All these views thus imply a substantial degree of vagueness, yet at the very least signal a shift from negative comparisons based on idiosyncratic selections of differences towards a generative dynamic fuelled by similarities. And as I have argued elsewhere, ‘similarity’ in the end is just as much a matter of personal selection, yet at the same time also allows one to discuss a text’s ‘transcodification’ in a constructive – i.e. non-reductive – fashion (Collard 2011: 21).

Just so, by its minimalistic nature, the case of Jesurun’s ‘Mildred Pierce re-make/remodel’ steers attention away from the ‘finished’ artistic product while inviting reflection on both the role of individual agency in the adaptation process and on the latter’s various constituents – conceptual as well as material (see also Naremore 2000: 10; Murray 2012: 370). For this reason, my essay will first briefly retrace the troubled conversion from James M. Cain’s 1941 novel Mildred Pierce to the 1945 film adaptation directed by Michael Curtiz and produced by Jerry Wald via multiple screenwriters and many more rewrites, before tackling the theme of betrayal so conspicuous in both works on a narrative level by linking it to the adaptation process, and finally reconceptualising it via Jesurun’s experimental reimagining as an instance of incommensurability with affective implications. Indeed, given that both Cain’s novel and Curtiz’s and Wald’s film already notably departed
from generic expectations (LaValley 2008: 35), I believe that the angle offered by Jesurun’s remodelling holds the potential of presenting the adaptation principle not as a pejoratively connotated act of betrayal, but rather as denoting the generative character of ‘materialized’ because homology-based incommensurability.

2. Complex conversions

Although commercially successful, the first filmic adaptation of Cain’s depression-era novel by the Warner Brothers studio arguably provides a textbook example of the potential complexity of such conversions. So laborious, in fact, was the balancing act of intersemiotic transposition from page to screen within the business model of a Hollywood ‘major’, – juggling the artistic ambitions of cast and crew, the divergent interpretations of the screenwriting team, the very vocal disapproval of the original author, and the dictates of the Motion Picture Production Code – that Tom Chapman, an assistant story editor working on the project, acknowledged in an internal memo that “It is commonplace in this business that authors who sell us stories often feel that their material has been destroyed by the vultures of Hollywood” (qtd. in Behlmer 1985: 260). And even if ‘destroyed’ is likely too strong a term, it at least captures the sense of frustration the process generated across eight treatments and screenplays by six different screenwriters. Since the novel’s publication, though, it had found a strong supporter in Warner Brothers producer Jerry Wald, who oversaw virtually the entire production from purchasing the rights up till its theatrical release. Yet this was a problematic project from the very beginning, as even Wald’s first expressions of interest in the material were sternly rebuffed by the studio honchos who deemed the novel ineligible for approval by Joseph Breen, the executive in charge of enforcing the Production Code (Garrett 1995: 288). Wald persisted on the basis of his own conception of the film, which was far less steeped in practical considerations and more in line with the studio’s predisposition to noir-intrigues – a perspective that however required to “be played from start to finish on a higher level” (Wald qtd. in Behlmer 1985: 257). His drive was, therefore, foremost a conceptual one, which paralleled his conception of filmmaking and, incidentally, adaptation.

On the surface level the changes look significant – the film adds a murder plus numerous flashbacks in the narration and omits elder daughter Veda’s success in a musical career – but ultimately do not disrupt the ‘homology’ Cain created between subject, tone, and atmosphere. Ironically, this was less the case for the film’s glossy style, more attuned to the studio system’s 1940s brand of filmmaking than to the work’s own semiotic logic. So, despite the script’s laborious pre-production run, it was actually the least substantial of considerations that caused
most disruption, especially given the fact that James M. Cain’s own brand of ‘hard-boiled’ depression-era prose distinguished itself by its tough-guy knowingness, gritty realism, dispirited mood, and an overall sense of betrayal (see also LaValley 2008: 39). For ‘betrayal’ very much remained an issue throughout the adaptation process, even if the decision to conceive the film as a showcase for lead actress Joan Crawford’s comeback – with all the glamour and luxury this implied – strikes as somewhat crude with regard to the novel’s *noir*-ethos. On the other hand, Jerry Wald strove to combine Warner’s commercial interests with a personal ambition to stretch the limits of the Production Code and generic conventions alike by concocting a special brand of women’s movie with noirish overtones and sexual suggestiveness. Wald’s was, in short, an interpretation of the original material at the level of homology-based incommensurability, executed with an experienced producer’s pragmatism.

Jack Boozer has argued in his insightful introduction to the collection *Authorship in Film Adaptation* (2008) that analyses of film adaptations can greatly benefit from studying the script intertext, as the amalgamation of multiple minor or major decisions may point us to more general aesthetic motives, artistic ambitions, and structuring principles (Boozer 2008: 24). Once again such an approach is bound to compensate for missing elements with idiosyncratic speculation, but speculation of a more informed kind still. The opposite also applies, according to Karen Diehl, for the study of individual changes effected by an adaptor to her invariably implies a ‘return’ of the original author in empowered or disempowered form (2005: 102). Moreover, intermedia-theorist Lars Elleström demonstrated that both conceptions may benefit from highlighting the difference between (final) representation and (processual) mediation (2013: 118) – a perspective effectively combining authorship, equivalence, difference, and materiality, and thus yielding a more representative picture of the complex matrix constituted in adaptation practice than provided by impressionistic ‘fidelity’-based comparisons obsessed by ‘betrayal’.

After all, as leading adaptation theorist Thomas Leitch argued in a keynote lecture, “adaptations are texts that cross the lines”, effectively making them texts that “cross hermeneutic borders” via a “hermeneutics of estrangement” (Leitch 2013). He thereby fittingly complements Lars Elleström’s claim that in discussing adaptations it is imperative to take into account how the different art forms represented in the relation *interrelate* as purveyors of meaning potential (2013: 113). Indeed, in the search for shared structuring principles between ‘source text’ and ‘target text’ one could do worse than start looking for a common communicative core in the vessels that vehicle the content. Belgian semiologist André Helbo illustrates this perspective by borrowing the principle of ‘transduction’ from medical science, where it designates the transmission of genetic material from one bacteriophage to
another by a third colonising organism, whereby the term’s prefix stresses the mediating role of the transfer itself. Adaptation, accordingly, appears as a reciprocal exchange of procedures that feeds on complex networks of poly-systemic relations, operators, and operative strategies (2006: 21–22). Accordingly, since ‘betrayal’, to paraphrase Leitch, is bound to happen anyway, pointing it out comes down to stating the obvious.

In similarly obvious terms one could posit that both Cain’s novel and the Warner Brothers adaptation ‘share’ the theme of ‘betrayal’ as leitmotiv by adhering to a virtually unchanged plot: after suffering a broken marriage and financial hardship exacerbated by the Depression, the eponymous heroine builds a profitable business while driven by a desire to control the love of her beautiful, gifted, but also snobbish oldest daughter Veda, and eventually loses everything when the latter betrays her mother by sleeping with her second husband. Yet, merely by considering this crude common core the irony behind Cain’s own rejection of the filmed version as the degradation of a novel with serious aspirations to a mere whodunit (Hoopes 1982: 348–349) immediately transpires: a wilfully suggestive story about betrayal is allegedly betrayed in an adaptation that tries to recapture this suggestiveness because the original author takes issue with generic markers intended to accommodate the audience of the other medium. As aptly captured by the Italian maxim ‘tradditore e traditore’, translation from one discursive field to another always implies a ‘betrayal’ of some sort, and this despite the transfer of meaning that nonetheless occurs. A more constructive perspective accordingly imposes itself.

3. Materializing incommensurability

Jørgen Bruhn recently posited that the seemingly one-directional motion of adaptations in practice comes into being via “a negotiation that takes place across the preliminary borders of the two (or more) works included in the process” (2013: 76). The adaptor, after all, will look for analogies as foundation to the new creation and thus elicit a reciprocal relation reaching far beyond the boundaries of the new adaptation by inscribing itself in both an adaptive tradition and the wider cultural complex that spawned it. As a conceptual metaphor, analogy in turn resembles adaptation in its simultaneous connotation of inclusion and exclusion, as of product and process. In both cases, qualitative reasoning-expert Kenneth D. Forbus posits, “performance, rather than fidelity is their goal” (2001: 41), thereby stressing the broader relevance of the creative and interpretative processes over assessments of any decontextualized product. For if we indeed consider adaptation as the result of associative thinking, it accordingly appears as an intermedial
‘event’ fuelled by reciprocities between media and agents, and this in contrast to what Regina Schober has termed “traditional approaches built on the presupposition of clear-cut medial borders and unidirectional cause and effect relationships” (2013: 91). Moreover, advances in translation and cognitive studies alike have indicated that the notion of ‘fidelity’ forms an unsatisfactory criterion to rate intersemiotic transpositions for the relatively straightforward reason that ‘meaning’ cannot circulate without being affected by the medium that conveys it (see e.g. Bassnett 2006: 85–95). On top of that, confronting the mediation behind the signification process echoes a reasoning predating even the publication of Cain’s 1941 novel. In 1934, pragmatic philosopher John Dewey already argued that any art form constitutes a process rather than an object on account of the aesthetic experience it stimulates, which to him represents an active or dynamic rather than passive or receptive mode of perceptual activity (1979 [1934]: 35). To semiotician C.S. Peirce, moreover, the sign generated by the artwork functions as a medium in its interactions with other signs. Through its various modes – iconic, indexical, symbolic – it thus inserts itself in an ongoing flow with other signs mediating between the life-world in which we live, the artistic composition, and our aesthetic interpretation of it (1958: 228). When taken together these arguments effectively imply that there can be neither ‘pure’ signs nor ‘neutral’ media, let alone ‘original’ interpretations. All the more reason, therefore, to consider the role of the screenplay in the adaptation process.

For the screenplay like no other perspective materializes the textual transposition of a single-track medium like printed text into a multi-track medium like film with all the compromises, collaborations, as well as new narrative possibilities this mediation implies. The adapted screenplay moreover lacks the referential aura of both the ‘source text’ on which it feeds and the ‘target text’ that it fuels because it only represents an intermediate stage in an ongoing process. It was therefore with the best of intentions that producer Jerry Wald pitched the idea to James M. Cain to open the film version of *Mildred Pierce* with a mysterious murder and tell the story in flashbacks. The novelist immediately disagreed but was unable to propose a cinematic alternative to his novel’s mode of narration: “I wrote *Mildred Pierce* as a novel and it’s hard for me to rethink it as a picture” (Cain qtd. in Hoopes 1982: 340). Wald therefore mandated story analyst Thames Williamson to write a first treatment, which Jack Warner himself then passed on to Joseph Breen’s office to gauge whether the project would stand a chance of receiving a Code approval. This was not the case, however, as this first draft was deemed “sordid and repellent”, thus adding censorship to an already complex equation (Garrett 1995: 288). The script then went through another seven versions before the film eventually got made, yet Cain kept insisting that each treatment somehow betrayed both the novel’s “fable-like element” and its “perfectly drawn” conclusion (Garrett
1995:291). Thus, whilst I am not disputing the sincerity of James M. Cain’s aesthetic considerations, I struggle to look past the muddled thinking of accepting to sell the rights for the adaptation of his novel to the screen but then objecting to the realities of filmmaking. Noel Baker, adaptive screenwriter of *Hard Core Logo* (1996 – dir. Bruce McDonald), wryly noted in his *Hard Core Road Show: A Screenwriter’s Diary* (1997) that

The contract lets you know where you the writer stand in brutally frank legal language. You can be fired at any time. You are powerless and for the most part anonymous, unless you also happen to direct, produce, and/or act. Your credit can be taken away from you. Once your work is bought, it’s like a house you’ve designed and sold. The new owners can do whatever they want to it, add mock-Tudor beams, Disneyland castle turrets, plastic fountains, pink flamingos, garden gnomes, things that satisfy desires and contingencies that have nothing to do with you and your original intent for your material. (Baker 1997: 15)

Cain’s is the kind of thinking, therefore, that has by analogy also plagued the adaptation principle all along, for that matter – as confirmed by Thomas Leitch in his influential ‘Twelve fallacies in contemporary adaptation theory’:

Fidelity to [a] source text – whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole – is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense. (Leitch 2003: 161)

With this in mind, I therefore propose to ditch the cousin concepts of ‘fidelity’ and ‘betrayal’ to examine wilfully unfaithful versions that arguably better capture the concept’s complexity.

4. Capturing complexity

Central to experimental artist John Jesurun’s adaptation aesthetic is an exploration of how technically mediated communication influences our perception. To him, drawing attention to the mediation behind the signification process invariably carries an emancipatory potential in the sense that ‘meaning’ and ‘identity’ thus appear incommensurable and, incidentally, malleable:

Everything’s got to be floating in the spaces I create, floating in motion, in flux. You look one way, you have to look the other way. The audience is invited to be part of that, they are also implicated into being that as well. You know, as a mind, or as a person. So, yes, they are invited to be part of it. (qtd. in Collard 2017: 13)
Jesurun’s self-professed project is in essence nothing but “shift[ing] focus to accommodate the imagination” (1993: 68) while characteristically refusing the ‘facile’ illusion of interpretative closure. Instead, his audiences are made to experience the necessity of cognitive convergence via deliberately fragmented narratives that prompt us to act as active, complicit participants picking up the elements placed before us and complementing these with our own, idiosyncratic associations.

Many people often ask me whether I am crazy to present my plays the way I do. But this line of thinking is actually quite old. [...] Still in the arts people think convergence is like race-mixing or something (laughs). They do not want to mix ‘sacred’ things, to spoil the ‘purity’, and then I say ‘No, nothing is really pure’. So you have to start letting go – especially in these political days. What, after all, is ‘pure American culture’, for instance? It doesn’t mean anything now. I do think many people, when hearing about ‘convergence’, associate it with pollution, a disintegration of things. But all these references of ideas that people have been circulating, often it is at the same time too much for them to deal with.

(qtd. in Collard 2017: 19)

In the case of ‘Mildred Pierce remake/remodel’, Jesurun erects a communicative bridge on the mere basis of a metareferential quotation – the title – and a few basic plot elements pared down to an absolute minimum yet sufficient to allow for recognition and prompt a reconsideration of transmedial transfers. So blunt is the subversion of our expectations that it shatters simplistic conceptions of authority, originality, and relationality while eliciting a visceral acknowledgment of the adaptation principle’s incommensurable quality. Or what else are we to think of the following disclaimer:

I have set several of the first crucial scenes. From there I jump to concocting statements by each of the main characters to view the story from six points of view. I’ve assembled a new cast. MILDRED PIERCE, the mother who sacrifices everything for her daughter and then is betrayed by almost everyone in sight, is played by Susan Sarandon. Her first husband BURT is played by Steve Buscemi. Mildred and Burt’s scheming friend WALLY is played by Kevin Spacey. Mildred and Burt’s self-centered, vicious daughter VEDA is played by Liv Tyler. Mildred’s elegant and deceiving second husband BARRAGAN is played by Richard Gere. Mildred’s openly lesbian friend and employee [IDA] is played by Isabella Rosselini.

(Jesurun 1997: 58)

Obviously fantastic, the choice of cast does, however, complement the structural conception by relying extensively on the viewers’ associative capacities. This reasoning is not at all as far-fetched as it might seem from a more orthodox ‘fidelity’ angle. After all, as cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter has demonstrated, the very concept of ‘Meaning’ is constituted through the mental mapping onto each
other of two entities: triggerable data units “sound asleep in the recesses of long-term memory” (2001: 504) and a set of incoming stimuli with which we attempt to align these. Simply put, signification occurs through recognition, and whereas a certain core of meaning may very well travel, it can never be captured without its techno-cultural mediation. In ‘Mildred Pierce remake/remodel’ the opening actually offers us stereotypical typecasting at its finest and serves primarily to foster the aforementioned sense of recognition:

As in the original film, the first scene opens with the murder. We open on a luxurious Fire Island Pines house on a windy summer night. The sea is black. Five shots ring out hitting Barragan. He falls to the floor and mutters ‘Mildred’. We cut to a woman’s figure running out of the house onto a dock to a speedboat. The boat tears away from the dock and across the choppy waters of the bay.

(Jesurun 1997: 59)

Recognition quasi-immediately makes way for eerie estrangement: the heroine’s name is uttered while the rest of the setting is radically different, which subtly reverts the whodunit logic of the film back to the more dispiritedly impressionistic mood of the novel while leaving the viewer dangling in mid-air while “Dionne Warwick singing a neverending blues version of ‘Summertime’” is blasting in the background. The intertextually-induced impression of in-betweenness is then confirmed by Barragan’s ‘statement’ from beyond the grave:

Technically I should have no statement because I am dead but I’ll do it anyway. I was stupid and now I’m dead and stupid. I never should have gotten mixed up with these people. But I needed the money. There is no greater tragedy than lost wealth.

(Jesurun 1997: 61)

Later in the same statement he even reveals the identity of his murderess, yet in wording sufficiently ambiguous to sustain the impression of ambiguity:

As smart as Mildred was she could never tell that everyone around her was cheating her. She attracted cheats like flies. Her first husband, her daughter, Wally, me. Everyone but Ida. Ida knew the score but Mildred wouldn’t listen. Dummy! And that devotion to her daughter was way out of line. It was obvious that her daughter hated her and was disgusted by her. I did ask Veda to marry me. But I was drunk that night and she wouldn’t sleep with me unless I said I would. So I did. And then the bitch kills me.

(Jesurun 1997: 61)

All subsequent statements exude a similar air of transparency by the confidence in their tone, yet actually increase the ambiguity by their intrinsic contradictoriness. For, despite the bluntness of the piece’s wilful ‘betrayal’ of the original film’s structure and the distinctly un-glamorous, fixed-frame broad daylight low-budget clip posted on Jesurun’s YouTube channel, the subtlety with which ‘Mildred
Pierce remake/remodel’ tangoes between recognition and estrangement makes it – ironically enough – completely representative of both the 1941 novel and its 1945 adaptation on behalf of its ‘noir’ conception.

5. Noir narration

As Barton Palmer so succinctly stated, “film noir dialogized a storytelling tradition previously marked by ideological closure” (2004: 264). It is neither a genre nor a tradition, just as it is not bound by theme or setting. As such, film noir resists critical consensus because it communicates chiefly “by tone” (Schrader 2005: 230). Heavily intertextual, it combines the ‘hard-boiled’, epigrammatic prose of Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Chandler, and indeed James M. Cain with the bleak, introspective mood famously found in the plays and novels of the French existentialists. Stylistically, a general sense of obscurity, albeit streaked with bright backlighting, prevents noir characters from speaking with authority. Through various techniques and semiotic channels film noir emphasizes a lack of priorities and certainties, thus effectively celebrating reflection over affirmation, process over product, while constituting a case of persistent narrative excess. With its overall air of disenchantment, seedy sexuality, and gritty greedy characters vacillating between venality and fortitude, the 1945 film version of Mildred Pierce contains “elements that fit perfectly into the [then] emerging film noir mode” (Garrett 1995: 287) – yet so, as we saw, does Jesurun’s remake-concept.

In the latter version we find constant resonances of familiar plot elements, partially overlapping statements, and semi-conspicuous metonyms. This, too, is standard Jesurun lore: deploying a sheer endless range of stimuli and strategies to attract our attention while simultaneously refusing unifying perspectives. Consider in this regard the text’s ending, echoing Veda’s snobbish resentment of her mother’s pie-making but reversing the perspective in more ways than one:

When Veda ran away he set her up with a band in his club. I went to see her one night. She was awful, she sang ‘Loan Me A Dime’. Pathetic. I wanted to throw a pie at her, but then I thought “don’t be a snob.” But I’m not sorry I threw that telephone at Wally in the police station hallway. Ida has been my only real friend. Who would have known but she was the first to hire me as a waitress? If it hadn’t been for her I never could have started my business. I never knew she was a lesbian until last year. What I am left with now? My ‘friend’ Wally who’s cheated me for years, a dead husband killed by my own daughter and my business ruined. It’s a wonderful life. And now I think I’m falling in love with my first husband again. Yeah, so what, big deal. Fine. Let them eat pie. (Jesurun 1997: 63; italics mine)
When, in the dying moments of this remodelling, the murderer, that derided addition of the film, is revealed, it no longer matters as the text’s suggestiveness has succeeded in emphasizing different concerns – like the book, in fact. What we are left with is a complex character who is oddly resilient, resourceful, and refuses outright cynicism with a quasi-Sisyphean reflex to start over. Jesurun’s trademark ‘sampling’ technique of blending familiar fragments and references from television series, film classics, children’s books, or pop songs, but also from scholarly treatises (see Walkenhorst 2005: 43), of course gives credence to this example, with the added particularity that this Sisyphean disposition is conveyed at once textually, visually, aurally, or, indeed, by tone. Actually, like the adaptation principle itself as described by Robert Stam, Jesurun’s Mildred-character effectively acts as a “generative grammar” (2007: 46) on behalf of her resilient and especially resourceful ‘adapt-ability’ – that is, as representative of an approach straddling conventionality and resourcefulness, and thus with her Sisyphean disposition constituting another turn in an ongoing process of complex negotiations.

6. Concretized coda

An analogous reasoning applies to John Jesurun’s (here: largely hypothetical) audience, who at this point has been cognitively conditioned to interpret proactively and concretize the blanks in a highly suggestive narrative problematizing its own lineage – all while communicating through homology. Such a take on a ‘canonical’ adaptation case in fact confirms the adaptation principle as a processual, generative and above all affective phenomenon. After all, as demonstrated by N. Katherine Hayles in her book How We Think (2012), the kind of embodied cognition activated by deliberately ‘incommensurable’ adaptations like John Jesurun’s ‘Mildred Pierce remake/remodel’ which stimulate attentive focus, unconscious perceptions, and nonconscious cognition, in fact “provides the basis for dynamic interactions with the tools it helps to bring into being” (2012: 87). Indeed, when a text is so wilfully elusive and reflexive as Jesurun’s ‘Mildred Pierce remake/remodel’, a purely intellectualist approach simply does not suffice as our response is so significantly associative, and thus visceral because based on affective play with recognition and estrangement. This case thus echoes one of the key tenets from embodied cognition, viz. that interpretations are produced through a mind-body interface, which itself is fuelled by our actions and perceptions, but also by nature, culture, and intervention with our environment (Hirose 2002: 289–299). It therefore helps us extend our understanding of adaptations by presenting them as active contributors to a new kind of homology-based cultural literacy that celebrates rather than settles intrinsically incommensurable questions.
References


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