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Confluent auteurism: a psychoanalytic approach to adaptation

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Abstract

When asked if they cultivate a particular style, the Coen Brothers – who are widely regarded as consummate auteurs, that is, directors with such a distinctive style that they are regarded as the authors of their films – replied: 'I don't think there's a thread, at least a conscious thread, anyway, between the stories we're telling… it's what you call style in retrospect only'. Despite this repudiation, filmgoers from the casual to the cinephile ardently affirm the Coens' 'auteur' status. While lauded for their original screenplays, the Coens' adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* has received wide critical acclaim. I contend it is such a successful adaptation that it seems both Coenesque and McCarthyesque – a perfect melding of two distinctive authorial voices. It may seem contradictory to group 'melding' and 'distinctive' in the same sentence, however, our imaginations are capable of holding and assimilating what seems 'black and white' into a general sensation of confluence.

When we read a novel, pictures are generated in our mind's eye. These images are called *phantasies*. The word phantasy is drawn from the field of psychoanalysis and is used widely across many theorisations. The Lacanian film theorist, Cristian Metz, deployed 'phantasy' most compellingly as a marker of the images we generate when we read texts. When we watch adaptations of novels we love, our phantasies are challenged by the potent medium of the cinema. Our most common reaction to the adaptation is: 'it wasn't as good as the book'. Rarer is the sensation of confluence that I experienced with the Coens' adaptation. I am interested in why we either 'spit out' the film or lovingly embrace it as a 'faithful' reproduction of the text.

Since this dialectic seems to have only been obliquely explored in the past, I have coined a new term: *confluent auteurism*. In this dissertation, I approach this experience of confluent auteurism from several psychoanalytically informed angles. What I reveal not only bears on adaptation and auteur studies but also reader-response and reception theory. Ranging from Lacan's theory of the gaze and Klein's object relations to Barthes' 'pleasure of the text', I engage in a hermeneutic voyage of discovery. Ideas, like phantasies, are malleable. My theoretical formulation will be advanced, problematised and reformulated throughout the course of this dissertation illustrating how the invention of a new terminology is as much enmeshed in existing thought as texts are in other texts.