“You Ever Think about the Term ‘Homeland Security’?” Todd Field’s Adaptation of Tom Perrotta’s Little Children

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Abstract

While 9/11 has had a significant impact on cultural production, not all of the works produced are “original” ones. It may be taken as a trait of the truly traumatic or decisive event that it not only affects the narratives that follow it but also demands that earlier narratives be told anew through its lens. I therefore argue that the practice of adaptation merits special attention when dealing with imaginations of 9/11, since adaptations interpret and frequently reevaluate the medium on which they are based. The new work of art that emerges potentially adds a dimension the “original” does not have. This essay discusses two novels and their film adaptations, namely (The) 25th Hour (2000/2002) and Little Children (2004/2006), exploring the means which the films use in order to portray a “new”, significantly altered post-9/11 world.

In his essay “Todd Field’s Persistence of Belief”, dealing with his 2006 adaptation of Tom Perrotta’s Little Children (2004), director Todd Field writes: “Adapting a novel means waging war on a novel”. His statement reiterates the idea that an adaptation changes one medium into another one, in this case, a novel into a film. While it refers to the differences in the two media, it also implies the need to read anew, that is, to place a work into a new context that might have emerged in the time between the writing of the novel and the making of the film. Often, a lot of time has passed between the novel and its film adaptation – novels by Jane Austen, for example, have generated many adaptations – and some directors, apart from making medium-specific changes when adapting the novel to the screen, are also interested in depicting the changes in politics, culture, and society that have occurred in the meantime. In order to make a

successful film, they often have to alter the source significantly. One example of this practice is the well-known film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), based on Joseph Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which reads the novel through the lens of the Vietnam War, an event so decisive that it changes a work whose existence precedes the new interpretation.

9/11 has triggered a response from filmmakers who have adapted novels to the screen. In the process, some add a political dimension absent from the respective novel. For example, while Tom Perrotta’s novel *Little Children*, published in 2004 and set in the summer of 2001 before 9/11, does not deal with 9/11, Todd Field’s film adaptation clearly brings 9/11 elements into the movie. Although the time span between novel and film is very short in comparison to the adaptations mentioned above – in one case it is about one year, in the other two years – the gravity of 9/11 and the changes it brought about make its inclusion in the film necessary. This has affected the narrative itself in that, for example, characters have been changed. 9/11 is reflected also in the imagery, the soundtrack, and lighting, to name just a few cinematic devices.

Before focusing on the novel and film *Little Children*, I briefly discuss another adaptation in which a film adds a political, post-9/11 dimension originally missing in the novel: Spike Lee’s film *25th Hour* (2002), based on David Benioff’s novel *The 25th Hour* (2000). Benioff also wrote the screenplay, albeit prior to 9/11. The attacks occurred when the filming had already started, and Spike Lee’s film version thematizes the aftermath of 9/11.4

The novel’s protagonist Montgomery Brogan, called Monty, has been convicted of dealing drugs and sentenced to seven years in prison. The novel covers his last 24 hours in New York City before he has to report there. Lee’s film version adds a post-9/11 setting. Since novel and film are set in New York City and the film was produced in the wake of the attacks, the decision to address 9/11 may seem unavoidable. Lee goes beyond merely acknowledging the attacks, however. The allusions are so manifold and tied in with the plot that their inclusion adds a new level to the film. In her essay “An Event ‘Like a Movie’? Hollywood and 9/11” – an analysis of two films that address the events of September 11 in different ways, namely *25th Hour* and Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* (2006) – Christina Rickli convincingly demonstrates that “Lee turns the haunting memory of September 11 into an important component of

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