

# THE REEL THING



# REPORT!

MADAME BOVARY

TT21  
ISSUE 6

ANNIHILATION

WINGS OF DESIRE  
MUSTANG



# EDITOR'S NOTES

Pub gardens are back, the sun is out, foreign holidays are on the horizon. As many parts of the world seem to be slowly but surely returning to a familiar way of life, we are everywhere reminded of that now rather irksome phrase: 'the new normal'. As much as its overuse has been a constant reminder of how very abnormal the past year has been, the phrase is essentially just another way of parcelling up the more energetic mantra of 'Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome'. Human beings are evolutionary creatures. We are forever changing ourselves, our surroundings and relationships. The ability to adapt is a survival instinct — a matter of life or death. The film industry's need to adapt and innovate has been a fight of this nature. Numerous lockdowns and the rise of streaming services have changed the way people watch films. The fate of cinemas still hangs in the balance as what would have been box office staples—films like *Ammonite*, *Chaos Walking*, and even *Godzilla vs Kong*—have opted for digital releases.

The recent botched attempt at evolution at the 2021 Oscars

ceremony exemplifies the trouble the film industry has encountered when it comes to reinventing itself. When all the high-society glitz and glamour we've come to expect of Hollywood's big night is replaced by face masks, a limited guest list, and zoom acceptance speeches, the magic sort of wears off. In an attempt to spice things up, however, the producers decided to alter the traditional order of events. Instead of saving the award for Best Picture until the end, the awards for Best Actress and Best Actor concluded the ceremony. With everyone expecting the Oscar to be awarded posthumously to the late star of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Chadwick Boseman, when—to everyone's surprise—Anthony Hopkins won instead, what had been posited as a great revolution against tradition fell alarmingly flat. Their NFT of Boseman, sold in goody bags and priced at £300,000 on digital art markets, is the logical climax of 2021's technophilia. Death, as with everything this last year, is something quickly digested and without context: we are relieved when only 25 COVID deaths are reported, we cannot consider these numbers as real anymore. Adapting to an entire world transplanted online has been ugly. Meetings, weddings, funerals, friendships — now exclusively via Zoom. 'Real' events are tinged with unreality

as the world ending unfurls itself through the laptop screen. The commodification of Boseman's passing is abhorrent, but it is not unexpected. The 'new normal' has removed the sanctity of human life.

Adaptation requires transformation; one thing must become something else entirely. As is often the case, many films adapt the written word, giving it a whole new world of signification as it is made three-dimensional. But transferring a story whose first artistic incarnation was strictly literary onto the screen can be a near-impossible task. From the escapades of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* to the eerie anomalous *Area X* of Alex Garland's novel *Annihilation*, film's attempts to capture a book's tone can either be a triumphant success or a lacklustre failure. But adaptation is not simply intertextual. Characters are forever adjusting to new environments, overcoming challenges, and discovering new identities. Sometimes evolution requires moving from a place of darkness into the light. The journey may be traumatic as with Deniz Gamze Ergüven's *Mustang*, a story about the struggles of young sisters living under the harsh rule of their patriarch, but adapting is never easy. It is an arduous uphill battle, one that comes down to a make-or-break situation every time.

3

## THE GENDERED POLITICS OF MUSTANG

By Julia Merican

7

## ANNIHILATION: WHEN ADAPTATION BECOMES TRANSFORMATION

By Kiera Johnson

9

## CLAUDE CHABROL'S MADAME BOVARY

By Clara Riedl-Riedenstien

11

## AN ANGEL'S ADAPTATION TO HUMAN LIFE IN WINGS OF DESIRE

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# THE GENDERED POLITICS OF ISOLATION IN DENİZ GAMZE ERGÜVEN'S 'MUSTANG'

The setting is a remote village in modern-day Turkey. At a family dinner, we can hear a speech by Erdoğan being broadcast from the radio. He intones that girls must be 'chaste and pure, know their limits, and mustn't laugh openly in public', that motherhood is their only role. 'You cannot explain this to feminists,' we hear him quip, 'because they don't understand the concept.'

The camera lingers over Elit İşcan, who plays Ece, just catching the smirk that flits across her lips when her president says, 'Where are the girls who blush when you look at them?' She flings a quiet psst at her younger sisters, Nur and Lale, holding up three dramatic fingers to her cheek. 'Can you read between the lines?' she whispers, jabbing her nose lightly with her middle finger. They dissolve into quiet giggles and their uncle sends Ece away from the table, the same uncle whom Lale has seen slipping into her sister's room at night. Perhaps all these signs make it easier to understand why, within minutes, the thudding sound of a gunshot is heard from upstairs.

Mustang has often been compared to Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*. But present-day rural Turkey marks a very different backdrop to 1970s suburbia; in place of delicate unicorn perfume bottles, we get pink flyswatters and penguin-shaped house-slippers. Five raggle-taggle girls with streaming dark hair stand in the stead of five blonder, more demure sisters, the Lisbons' hair straighter, their age-differences slighter. Something of the portrait of Selma lying in her bridal gown for yet another gynaecological examination

after she fails to bleed on her wedding day recalls a blood-soaked Cecilia in the bathtub, and it's not just the wedding dresses they both wear, but their expressions: vacant, unhappy, jaded beyond their years. The strongest link between the two films is not aesthetic, however, but thematic— their discerning depiction of female confinement and solidarity.

In *Mustang*, after an innocent game with five schoolboys is obscenely corrupted in a neighbour's report to their grandmother, the sisters become veritable prisoners in their own home. Their uncle, takes action: removing them from school, barring their windows, disconnecting the telephones and computers. Enlisting the help of their aunts and grandmother, he transforms the house into what Lale calls 'a wife factory'.

Despite the soporific torpor of housebound days, hope remains. There is a squirming sense of hope that refuses to be quelled. Whether repurposing the meagre resources available to them for liberating use, or outwardly defying their domestic incarceration, Ergüven's women are never passive, never content to be docile or to accept their lot.

As the weeks wear on, the girls' agitation reaches a fever pitch. In their grandest escapade, they take the bus to a women-only football game; 'I don't care about the match,' Sonay murmurs, 'I just want to get the hell out.' This creates one of the most moving moments of the whole film: when their aunts see the sisters' faces on a television screening of the game, they cut the electricity cords around the house, terrified lest the uncles

should see. 'I only found out later what Aunt Emine did for us,' Lale says. It is an unexpected moment of solidarity on the women's home front, prompting both the audience and the sisters to see the older women in a new light. It isn't just the girls who feel trapped at home; it is written on the lines of their grandmother's face, in the quiet solicitude and subdued sadness of their aunts.

This overwhelming sense of the sisters' eventual trajectory, and their inevitable initiation into this matronly world, feels fatalistic. Following the football match, the girls are groomed even more intensely for marriage. Sonay openly defies an attempt to match her to Osman, whose family her grandmother tries to sell her to, bartering customary words back and forth: 'My goodness, she's beautiful'; 'yes, she's one of a kind.' When they are invited over for tea, Sonay tells her grandmother, 'I love Ekin. If you ask me to marry anyone else, I'll scream.' Her triumph results in Selma being offered up to Osman instead, the girls all chronologically replaceable in the game of marriage. It's a strangely mechanical business: their interchangeability is as easy as substituting goods at a market stall, like putting one shiny apple in front of another.

But Ergüven refuses to oversimplify the domestic realm as a place of female subjugation by misogynistic standards. Marriage is also a tool that is weaponised by her women. When their grandmother finds out about the incestuous sexual abuse that Nur is being subjected to by their uncle, she orchestrates a deliberate marriage, the only





tool at her disposal, to protect her grandchild.

Domesticity and notions of womanhood are never disparaged; Ergüven only criticises how patriarchal structures mishandle and abuse them. The gruelling lessons in household chores, play useful parts in the girls' enfranchisement down the line. Nur uses her quilt-stuffing skills by stitching tendrils of hair to pillowcases as she and Lale plot their escape to Istanbul. They manage to lock their uncle out with the very implements he uses to keep them inside in a curious play on Audre Lorde's philosophy that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', only 'allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game'. It can be no coincidence that Nur's heavy dowry chest is used to barricade themselves in and keep her fiancée and his family out.

But the point that Ergüven seems to be making here is that domestic tools, despite how they have been used, never belonged to 'the master' in the first place. Lorde asserts that the master's tools are 'only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.' In Nur and Lale's successful escape to Istanbul, Ergüven solidifies her point: only by leaving the patriarchal hearth can her protagonists fully reclaim these tools as their own.

This is a film that demands one's full attention, urging us to examine the complex ways that women extricate themselves from patriarchal subjugation, and prompting us to redefine modern assumptions of domesticity and womanhood, to

see them not as encumbrances but as vehicles of strength and interdependence. Ergüven's world scrutinises the distinctively patriarchal terms of 'divide and conquer' through a discerning female lens, triumphantly recasting them as 'define and empower.'

**By Julia Merican**

# ANNIHILATION

WHEN ADAPTATION BECOMES TRANSFORMATION



There's a scene in *Annihilation* where Lena, our protagonist, begins to realise that the man in front of her is not her husband, Kane. He looks like Kane, talks like him too – but he can't explain his year-long disappearance on a secret mission, and doesn't even seem to know who Lena is. The camera draws in close on Lena's face as she realises that this Kane is not her Kane. The husband she knew is gone, transformed into another, and what sits before her is some uncanny double that she can't yet recognise.

Alex Garland's 2018 film *Annihilation* is based on a 2014 book of the same name by Jeff Vandermeer, and it follows Lena as she takes part in an expedition with four other women into a remote section of coastland called Area X. The further they venture into Area X, the more surreal the environment around them becomes – mutations occur

in impossible places, plants grow in human shapes, and a mutated bear screams with the voice of its victims. Yet this isn't a standard film adaptation: Alex Garland based the screenplay of *Annihilation* on his memories of the book, rather than the book itself.

In discussions of adaptations, there's sometimes the tendency to uphold the original text as a perfect ideal which the adaptation can only struggle to live up to. It's too easy, I think, to look at an adaptation and try to pick out all the similarities and differences between the film and its source material. The shadowy government agency studying Area X is the same in the book and film, for example, as are the themes of ecological disaster, trauma and self-destruction. But the specific characters, plots and motifs in the film all diverge significantly from the book. For

audience members who are familiar with both versions of the narrative, there is then a compulsion towards comparison, towards investigating what is lost and gained as the narrative moves from page to screen.

With Annihilation, I believe Garland shows us how the question of adaptation can be navigated differently. Rather than trying to replicate the plot or characters exactly as they appear in the book, Garland instead chooses to foreground the atmosphere of the novel, the almost tangible feelings of tension, anxiety and spellbound horror that it inspires in the reader. So what does this mean for the relationship between adaptation and source text? It may be more productive to look at the book and the film not as a clichéd hierarchy of superior source material and inferior adaptation, but as two

separate texts that are distinct from one another but still linked – fraternal twins, or conversation partners.

Those who have watched *Annihilation* might already be able to tell where I am going with this argument, as the film returns again and again to ideas of doubles and mirror images. In one scene, Natalie Portman's Lena watches two deer run through the woods, eerily in sync; and later she is forced to confront her own alien twin deep inside Area X. Lena's husband Kane, played by Oscar Isaac, appears in *Annihilation* in two forms – there is the “real Kane” who belongs to Lena's memories, and the “not-Kane” double who somehow escaped Area X. The line between real and fake, original and copy, is constantly shifting, blurring.

Perhaps then, we can conceive

of Annihilation the film as the double of Annihilation the book. By prioritising the atmosphere evoked by the original text, Garland manages to capture the gut-wrenching tension of the novel and the dreamlike, ambiguous beauty of its horror, while at the same time creating a film that can stand alone on its own artistic merit. The two versions of the narrative, both book and film, become mirrors to one another – not quite the same but not entirely different either. And yet, as Garland has observed, even differences have a common root:

"Where does it come from? Ultimately, if you keep going down the evolutionary chain, it comes from the book, because the book is the source material, and it doesn't matter if it's in the book or not; that's sort of the genesis of it. And so there's stuff that's in the film that isn't in the book, but that stuff

wouldn't exist if the book didn't exist, so what are you going to do?" One of the central themes of the narrative, that you cannot interact with something without also being somehow changed by it, is thus reflected in the adaptation – or transformation – from book to film. The adaptive process itself becomes its own Area X, producing two versions of Annihilation that can coexist as doubles without one necessarily detracting from the other. The film seems self-aware of this point: while one character sees Area X's constant process of mutation as destructive, almost cruel, our protagonist Lena replies that Area X is "not destroying. It's making something new."

**By Kiera Johnson**

# CLAUDE CHABROL'S MADAME BOVARY 1991

As with most masterpieces of literature, *Madame Bovary* has been considered 'unfilmable'. And whilst Claude Chabrol's 1991 film starring Isabelle Huppert as Emma Bovary somewhat destabilises that assertion, there is truth to it.

The novel follows the life of young Emma Bovary. After leaving the convent, she is quickly married to the doctor Charles Bovary; whilst being a kind man and husband, he does not fulfill Emma's aspirations of grandeur in the slightest. She is perpetually bored, acting out both sexually and financially. She pursues affairs to satisfy her romantic fantasies and to play out the characters she has made in her head. Her modest house becomes a showroom she cannot afford, driving her deeper and deeper into debt. An ever-accelerating pace of the novel leads to her inevitable demise.

Giving credit where credit is due, the film excellently skips the common pitfalls of adaptation (and let us be frank, films in general). It is not flashy, over-romanticised or nostalgic. Emma does not suddenly live in picture-perfect surroundings, as is the case in the (terrible) 2014 adaptation of the novel by Sophie Barthes. It sticks to the novel and aims to accurately transpose it to the screen, without taking unnecessary liberties. Though the almost literal transposition has been criticised, I would argue in this case it works in the film's favour; no one

wants yet another film adaptation in which the complexities of a character are turned into a 'one-size-fits-all' love story. Similarly, this sort of transposition allows us to highlight the complexities in narration, switching the perspectives from Emma Bovary to a narrator, influencing the way the story is told.

And yet, as Vincent Canby from the New York Times points out, Chabrol goes wrong in his depiction of Bovary. Isabelle Huppert, the ever-poised image of sophistication, simply cannot represent Emma Bovary. There is an obvious difference in age and appearance which does not align with literal transposition; Huppert is a lot older than Emma would have been, with an entirely different complexion. Even more striking, however, is the lack of expression which marks Huppert throughout the film. Emotions remain unexplored, and thus there is but a vague indication of her downfall. Her disillusionment with her husband, her debt, all this is merely hinted upon. The true Emma Bovary simply would not have been so put together. The problem the film faces here seems to be one of adaptation: in order to film a character she must become coherent in some way, and it is precisely coherence which Emma Bovary does not have.

Perhaps the best way to summarise this would be to state, quite simply, that it just might be impossible to

make a film about someone whose life is determined by 'reading too many novels'.

By Clara Riedl-Riedenstein



# EARTH & SKY

## AN ANGEL'S ADAPTATION TO HUMAN LIFE IN WINGS OF DESIRE (1987)

Having lived in Berlin for half a year, Wim Wenders' version of the city filled with angels who listen to its people's thoughts remains unsurpassed. The original German title, "Der Himmel über Berlin" ("The Sky Above Berlin"), indicates that the film is full-heartedly dedicated the sky above, and stands in unapologetic contrast to how we see the same city in our time: the metropolis in Walter Ruttmann's documentary, a place where you see more concrete than clouds whenever you tilt up your head.

The open sky portrayed in the film is no made-up vision, but a leftover from history. Plunging straight into East-West division after World War II, the city's urban destruction was a result of 67,607 tons of Allied bombs. Intended as his homecoming project back in West Germany, Wim Wenders approaches such a crevice with utmost honesty and points towards grief and trauma that linger four decades post war, focussing on small people who try to usher back normality yet struggle to. Among them is the old poet Homer, who can't find his way around Berlin despite having lived there for years, or recognise Potsdamer Platz, his favourite spot that now lies in ruins and overgrown by weeds; and as he tries to re-orient himself with a photography collection, the photos depict piled up bodies on the rubbles. His dementia almost

suggests that memories are now erased because people and things that once contained them did not survive.

The mounting anxiety and agitation visible within Berlin's people like Homer invites a presumption that the angels are there to expedite their adaptation to their new reality. But instead we're presented with their limitations, their inability to touch, smell, and see in colour – but also to be heard and felt by humans. As the two angels Daniel and Cassiel observe, they're never able to engage with individuals or tamper with their lives. Despite their multiplicity of viewpoints and the depth of understanding, angels' gifts fail to translate into communication with their subjects or domain. As their freedom to look at life on earth is juxtaposed with their limited contact with it, their frustration increases. It soon becomes clear that the sky, a symbol of height, a sense of being superior and better than humans constantly strive for with violence and conflicts – is in itself incapable of adapting to a life on the ground, and too distanced, too helpless, to offer aid in worldly sufferings.

Wings acknowledges the incoherence between earth and sky, attempting to resolve it by





giving each of the two a chance to adapt to the other: humans in the library absorb words and knowledge, and muse on the mechanisms of planets; angels go to underground rock concerts and sit among children at circus shows. It's a childlike curiosity, a desire to observe and explore that binds lives from two levels together and makes them share an existence. The appreciation of childhood and its power to connect a terrestrial life with what's celestial is made most explicit in scenes where children are the only ones who can see and converse with angels. The angel Daniel eventually starts his new life as a human by behaving in a way that resembles a child: he runs down streets in excitement, savours every bite of food with fascination and, when he doesn't catch the trapeze artist he likes in time, kicks

Children in the film stand not for impetuosity and irresponsible insouciance, but intrinsic acuity and goodness in the early stages of human life, qualities that are gradually worn out by adulthood. Cutting between thoughts of fretful commuters, frightened teen prostitutes, and a young man heading towards suicide, *Wings'* moments of respite, of children playing and laughing, reminisce about childhood's presence in Berlin in a mournful tone, harking back at its opening sequence, a poem by Peter Handke: "Als das Kind Kind war..." ("When the child was a child..."). With subtle symbolism, the "angels in disguise" are in fact reminding us of the powers we're born with, powers that make even angels envious. And

to pursue the sky is not to grow wings, but to do what angels do: to look down at the earth, reflect on our thoughts, and appreciate life as it is. As the film ends on former angel Daniel looking up at acrobatic moves in the air performed by his human lover, who in reverse looks down at him to steady herself, we see sky and earth embrace each other in love, and are again made aware that the divine we look for is in ourselves.

**By Eleanor Zhang**

## Things to read:

A Queasy Nostalgia for the Movies –

Brandon Taylor

<https://www.thecut.com/2021/03/covid-19-pandemic-future-movie-theaters.html>

Real Life's author Brandon Taylor reminisces about midweek movie trips with fellow writer Garth Greenwell, and muses on the changes the pandemic portends for cinemas' future.

Looking Through the Veil: The

Theology of Movie Afterlives –

Donna Bowman

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7360-looking-through-the-veil-the-theology-of-movie-afterlives>

On Daniel Kaluuya's Incredible

Oscar Win—And Its Dispiriting

Aftermath. – Raven Smith

[https://www.vogue.com/article/daniel-kaluuya-oscar-win-and-aftermath?utm\\_source=instagram&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_content=instagram-stories&utm\\_brand=vogue&utm\\_social\\_type=owned](https://www.vogue.com/article/daniel-kaluuya-oscar-win-and-aftermath?utm_source=instagram&utm_medium=social&utm_content=instagram-stories&utm_brand=vogue&utm_social_type=owned)

"It pains me to watch such a peaking Black talent constantly diminished in small ways, chipped away at as he ascends. Kaluuya can never be just another brilliant, award-worthy actor; he has to be reminded that he's a Black man in this space, obtaining a Black version of success rather than a pure success." An angry response to Daniel Kaluuya's mix-up with Leslie Odom Jr. at the Oscars.

That tasteless Chadwick Boseman

NFT is even worse than we feared –

Andrew Paul:

<https://www.inputmag.com/culture/that-tasteless-chadwick>

[boseman-nft-is-even-worse-than-we-feared](#)

An article covering the Chadwick Boseman NFT token controversy and their exploitation of his death.

Interview with Elliot Page on his gender transition – Joanna Walters

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/apr/30/elliott-page-happiness-top-surgery-oprah-winfrey-interview>

Actor Elliot Page and gender transition

## Things to watch:

Annette (2021) – Trailer

<https://youtu.be/O68aFF8fOIA>

Little Birds (2021) – Trailer

<https://youtu.be/ptbSTMbVxw8>

Jack Clayton's Great Gatsby (1974)

available on Amazon Prime

Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris (1970) – Documentary gone wrong as young British filmmakers try to interview American poet and novelist James Baldwin but swiftly realise things are not going to plan. An example of how filmmakers fail to adapt to their environment as tensions boil over.

Julian Jarrold's Brideshead

Revisited (2008) – available on iPlayer, beautifully captures early 20th century Oxford in all it's (un)glory.

Rupert Everett's The Happy

Prince (2018) – available on iPlayer, documenting the last years of Oscar Wilde's life, and starkly harrowing.

Nico, 1988 (2017) recounts the later years of former Velvet Underground singer Nico and her fall from fame

The Handmaiden (2016) –

adaptation of the 2002 novel

Fingersmith set in Victorian Britain, translated to 20th century Korea.

## Things to listen to:

<https://adaptationpodcast.com/>

<https://www.inktofilm.com/>

