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'BETRAYING HOMER'?: FILMING THE *ODYSSEY* IN THE EUROPEAN NOVEL

In Iris Murdoch's 1978 novel *The Sea, The Sea*, a minor sub-plot concerns a project under development by friends of the main character, Charles Arrowby. The project is a film of Homer's *Odyssey* and, throughout the novel, Charles receives regular updates of its status. Casting problems and lack of funds take their toll, and the film is frequently cancelled. Clearly, this is a troubled production.

By referring to these apparent difficulties in getting such a film off the ground, Murdoch symbolises the tribulations and convolutions of the real-life story of adapting the *Odyssey* for the screen. This epic narrative has inspired not only 'direct' cinematic adaptations (such as *Ulysses* (1955) and a TV movie of the *Odyssey* (1997)) but also a small, though significant, body of more creative works, including such variations on Homer as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Of particular importance in this category are those works which actually take as their subject-matter the production of a film of the *Odyssey*, dramatising the issues that arise when adapting Homeric epic. Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le Mépris* is just such a work; Fritz Lang, playing himself, directs the film-within-a-film on Capri, where the conflicts surrounding the differing cinematic approaches employed by the various parties – director, writer, producer – spill over into 'contempt' in the main characters' marriage. *Le Mépris* is indeed a fascinating representation of the difficulties of filming Homer.

However, even more cogent and revealing assessments of the travails of filming an *Odyssey* can be found, not in the cinema itself, but in novels. The first is *Il Disprezzo* by Alberto Moravia (1954). This was the source text for Godard's film, but though the narrative structure is broadly similar, the treatment of the theme of cinematic adaptation is extended in the novel. Whereas Godard is quick to denigrate the Hollywood method, represented by the producer Jerry Prokosch, and present us with an apparently simple choice between brash spectacle on the one hand and the supposedly 'authentic' purity of Lang (and Godard) on the other, Moravia's account is more complex. Though the producer here is a fan of spectacle, too, the director (who favours a Freudian, 'psychological' approach) is also at odds with the writer, who believes he should try and translate the poetry of Homer directly to the screen. Similar concerns are raised in even more detail in Simon Raven's novel *Come Like Shadows* (1972, the eighth novel in the *Alms for Oblivion* series). Again, through an account of the making of an *Odyssey* film, this time on Corfu, the novel sets out with great clarity the conflicts that surround such a project. As well as examining the tensions between different approaches – the Hollywood spectacle, and the European 'art' film, for example – Raven (aided by his own thorough classical education) also elucidates a range of other concerns, from the language used for dialogue, to the choice of locations.

These novels (and, to a large extent, *Le Mépris*) consistently address the concerns which many classicists will have regarding an adaptation of the *Odyssey*, centring on the contentious question of fidelity to the original: a recurrent theme in Raven and Moravia is

the fear of 'betraying Homer' by filming his work. As such, this paper will suggest that these novelizations of 'filming the *Odyssey*' may provide the best criteria against which to judge actual film versions. The novels present us with full and honest accounts of the competing approaches and violent tensions arising in such a project, graphically revealing what most 'real' and finished films of the *Odyssey* will usually seek to conceal.