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Cultural Translation in Cross-Cultural Film Adaptation: An Ingardenian Analysis of Infernal Affairs and The Departed

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Abstract. Cross-cultural film adaptations often face the challenge of transplanting narratives across cultures without losing cultural nuances. Using *Infernal Affairs (2002)* and its Hollywood remake *The Departed (2006)* as case studies, this paper draws on Ingarden's four-layer theory of the literary work to develop a four-tier analytical model for film texts, systematically examining cultural translations across four dimensions: audiovisual materials, cinematography and editing, the narrative world, and audience imagination. The analysis reveals that at the audiovisual material layer, the composed stillness and mournful strings of the Hong Kong original were replaced by handheld camerawork and rock-and-roll energy, rebuilding the sensory foundation in American street naturalism; at the shot and montage layer, accumulative long-take editing gave way to percussive, externalized cutting aligned with Hollywood conventions; at the story world layer, the undercover dilemma was recoded from an Eastern crisis of identity dissolution into an American drama of class mobility, with the moral universe shifting from karmic retribution to institutional critique; and at the spectator imagination layer, the metaphysical gaps deliberately left open in the original were filled with directorial indictment, summoning a viewer prepared to judge rather than contemplate. Taken together, these layer-specific transformations demonstrate that successful cross-cultural adaptations involve not merely story-level localization but systematic cultural transformation across all four layers. The proposed four-layer model provides a structural analytical framework that transcends the dichotomy of "faithfulness versus betrayal" in adaptation research and offers a replicable tool for both scholars and filmmakers.

Keywords: Cross-cultural adaptation, Roman Ingarden, *Infernal Affairs, The Departed*, Cultural translation

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural film adaptations frequently encounter a persistent dilemma: the same narrative framework often yields markedly different receptions across cultures. To systematically investigate the mechanisms of cultural translation underlying this phenomenon, this article draws upon Roman Ingarden's four-layer theory of the literary work. Ingarden proposed that a literary work is constituted by four interconnected strata: the stratum of word sounds and phonetic formations, the

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stratum of meaning units, the stratum of represented objects, and the stratum of schematized aspects. Crucially, he acknowledged that different artistic media realize their schematized aspects through their own material means, thereby opening his ontology to trans-media application [1]. Building on this insight, the present study undertakes a conceptual translation of Ingarden's strata into a cinematic ontology: the audiovisual material layer, the shot and montage layer, the story world layer, and the spectator imagination layer. This translation does not equate film with literature; rather, it recognizes that the two media share a commensurable homology in the structural stratification of aesthetic reception [2, 3]. Applying literary-analytical models to cinema is not unprecedented: Christian Metz's film semiotics demonstrated that shot combinations could be analyzed as a "cinematic grammar," enabling rigorous study of how montage produces narrative meaning [4]. However, Metz's approach concentrated on the grammatical layer while underplaying the sensory immediacy of cinematic materials and the spectator's imaginative participation—dimensions that Ingarden's broader ontological framework is better equipped to address.

Against this analytical backdrop, the central research question is: How did *The Departed* culturally translate *Infernal Affairs* across these four layers, and how do these layer-specific transformations collectively account for the adaptation's success? This study defines "cultural translation" as the systematic replacement of the source culture's signifying system with one that is recognizable and resonant for the target culture, a process that operates simultaneously across the audiovisual material, shot logic, narrative world, and imaginative space. This definition shifts the focus of adaptation studies from the question of faithfulness to how a work is translated across cultures [5]. The significance of this study is twofold: theoretically, it transforms Ingarden's ontology into a structured instrument for cross-cultural adaptation research, offering an alternative to the fidelity-betrayal dichotomy; practically, it provides a replicable model for approaching adaptation as a systematic process of cultural translation operating at multiple textual levels simultaneously.

2. The audiovisual material layer: sensory displacement

In Ingarden's ontology, the first stratum—the stratum of word sounds and phonetic formations—concerns the most immediate material substrate of the literary work. Translated into cinematic terms, this becomes the audiovisual material layer: the sensory surface of image and sound that strikes the viewer before narrative comprehension sets in. Infernal Affairs and *The Departed* build their sensory worlds from markedly different materials.

Consider the protagonists' introductions. In *Infernal Affairs*, young Ming and Yan appear in sequences of composed stillness. The police academy scenes use a locked-down camera and a cool, desaturated palette of blues and grays; the quiet is almost monastic. Chan Kwong-wing's original score features mournful, sustained string melodies that evoke fatalistic melancholy rather than kinetic tension. As Teo observes, the film relies on "stillness and compositional precision to convey psychological pressure" [6]. The sensory world speaks of containment and an invisible order pressing down. Scorsese's *The Departed* establishes its own logic from frame one: The Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" snarls over the soundtrack, and Jack Nicholson's voice announces a man who intends to shape his environment. Young Colin Sullivan is introduced in a handheld shot on a sun-bleached Boston street; when Billy Costigan appears, the camera pushes aggressively into his face. This embodies Scorsese's signature street-level cinematic language: restless camera movement and rock-and-roll vitality construct a world of constant kinetic tension [7]. Where the Hong Kong version builds a sensory world of containment, the American version constructs one of restless energy.

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Performance styles reinforce this sensory divide. In *Infernal Affairs*, Tony Leung and Andy Lau rely on micro-expressions and eye control—complex emotions conveyed through the subtlest shifts of facial muscles and breathing. This restrained tradition is rooted in Hong Kong cinema's Eastern implicit aesthetics. As Law notes, Hong Kong cinema since the 1980s has cultivated a performance tradition emphasizing "internalized emotion expressed through minimal external gesture," particularly suited to the psychological density of the undercover narrative [8]. By contrast, *The Departed* features DiCaprio and Nicholson in a mode of explosiveness—Costigan's inner anxiety manifests through physical trembling and emotional outbursts, while Costello's inherent menace is externalized via exaggerated body language and abrupt violent acts. This is the acting logic of the Strasberg Method and American psychological realism, whose core is visualizing inner conflict—a sharp contrast to the Hong Kong version's internalizing approach.

Spatial symbols further anchor the two films in their respective cultural worlds. *Infernal Affairs* repeatedly returns to tea restaurants, rooftops, and police corridors—the tea restaurant a microcosm of Hong Kong civil society, the rooftop carrying the genre's obsession with height and displacement. *The Departed* replaces these with Boston bars, dock warehouses, and church basements—the bar signifying Irish ethnic roots, the church basement thrusting institutional corruption into the foreground. This substitution lays down, at the most immediate material level, divergent cultural pathways for the spectator. What makes this layer-level translation effective is not that one approach surpasses the other, but that *The Departed* locates its own sensory terms within a recognizably American cinematic tradition—the street naturalism of Scorsese's Mean Streets and Goodfellas. Rather than imitating the elegant restraint of the Hong Kong original, it rebuilds the sensory foundation in a register native to its cultural context, so that the spectator is, from the very first seconds, sensorily oriented within a familiar world.

3. The shot and montage layer: semantic logic in transition

Ingarden's second stratum, the stratum of meaning units, concerns how individual words combine into larger semantic structures. In cinema, this function is performed by shot composition and montage: the way individual shots are framed and sequenced constitutes the film's grammar of meaning-making. Here again, *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed* speak in fundamentally different cinematic languages.

The climactic rooftop confrontation offers the clearest test case. In *Infernal Affairs*, Andrew Lau stages the encounter with an austerity that borders on the theatrical. The camera is largely static, relying on clean two-shots and measured singles that hold on faces for beats longer than a Hollywood editor would dare. When Lau Kin-ming confesses, "I want to be a good man," the shot simply stays there, allowing Chan Wing-yan's silent response to register in real time. As Bordwell describes, Hong Kong cinema displays an "expressive density of the long take and the composed frame" [9]. The editing trusts the viewer to lean in. Scorsese's version operates on an entirely different principle. The rooftop meeting is cut fast and restless—reaction shots, push-ins, and rack focuses drive the rhythm forward, keeping us off-balance. As Bordwell notes, "Scorsese's editing externalizes psychological pressure, turning internal conflict into visible, percussive action" [7]. Where *Infernal Affairs* trusts accumulation, *The Departed* pushes tension outward.

The death sequences underscore the same divergence, and it is here that the editing choices become most consequential. *Infernal Affairs* handles Inspector Wong's fatal fall with editorial restraint bordering on ritual: a fixed long shot captures the descent ; the impact is withheld from view, and the sequence holds on Yan's face as the score carries the full emotional weight. The editing refuses to sensationalize. The Departed stages Queenan's death as a rapid volley of shaky

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shots—the fall and bloody impact in the same frame, no music to mediate the shock. Where one withholds, the other reveals; where one elongates grief, the other compresses it into a visceral burst.

This editorial contrast extends to scenes of negotiation. In *Infernal Affairs*, police station sequences rely on sustained two-shots that allow power dynamics to unfold within the frame; triad meetings are staged with a formal precision mirroring the hierarchical order of the organization itself. In *The Departed*, similar scenes are fragmented through rapid intercutting—Costello's bar gatherings shot with a restless camera that refuses to settle, the editing ricocheting between faces, externalizing the precariousness of every interaction. The same narrative scene type, cut two ways, reveals two distinct systems of meaning-making: one trusts accumulation within the frame, the other generates meaning through percussive energy between frames.

4. The story world layer: characters and thematic reconfiguration

Ingarden's third stratum, the stratum of represented objects, encompasses the characters, events, and settings that populate the work's fictional world. It is at this layer that adaptation undertakes its most visible act of cultural translation: the core narrative framework can be retained, yet its emotional and contextual substance is reconstructed out of cultural materials native to the target society.

Cultural translation at this layer is never driven solely by the creators' will to rewrite; it is propelled by deep-seated socio-historical contexts. *Infernal Affairs* emerged in 2002, a mere five years after Hong Kong's handover to China. At that time, Hong Kong society was permeated with intense identity anxiety—legally Chinese citizens yet culturally distanced from the mainland, "Who am I?" became a collective bewilderment. Chen and Wu argue that the undercover narrative in Hong Kong crime cinema is essentially a metaphor for Hong Kong people's identity split: the mole operating between law and underworld, unable to belong fully to either side, mirrors the predicament of Hong Kongers caught between Eastern and Western cultures [10]. The Buddhist imagery of the Avīci Hell that dominates the film's textual logic strikes a profound chord with audiences, as it articulates this shared psychological sentiment of inescapable torment.

The Departed, by contrast, is rooted in radically different social soil. The Irish-American community of South Boston has a history of immigration and struggle spanning over a century and a half—from famine refugees to political machines, Irish-Americans have long occupied an uneasy place in the racial-class structure. Scorsese himself grew up in New York's Little Italy and has an intimate understanding of organized crime and institutional corruption within Catholic immigrant communities. Thus, *The Departed*'s replacement of fatalism with institutional critique is not an arbitrary value preference but a conscious response to this cultural tradition: in a structure where church, police, and politicians are all contaminated, an individual's struggle inevitably points toward the indictment of the system [11]. Yong's comparative study confirms that the thematic divergence between the two films—Eastern Buddhist core versus Western institutional critique—is the necessary projection of each culture's deep structure [12].

Against this contextual backdrop, the specific rewrites in character, emotional lines, and moral universe can be properly understood. Billy Costigan inherits Chan Wing-yan's undercover role, yet his inner life is rebuilt. Chan's torment is existential—"I've been undercover so long I'm starting to forget who I am"—a crisis of identity rooted in a Confucian sense of self-as-role. Costigan's anguish, by contrast, is social and aspirational. Coming from a South Boston criminal family, his arc is a fight to escape the class destiny his background prescribes. His fear is not of losing himself but of never becoming the self he wants. The undercover dilemma is thus recoded from an Eastern meditation on identity dissolution into an American drama of class mobility and self-invention [11].

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The antagonist transforms in parallel. Lau Kin-ming is genuinely tormented by his duplicity, longing to be "a good man"; his tragedy is ethical. Colin Sullivan is driven by survival, power, and the desire to possess Madolyn. The adaptation further intensifies the emotional stakes by merging characters. *Infernal Affairs* gives each protagonist a separate love interest—Dr. Lee Sum-yee for Chan and Mary for Lau—keeping their romantic lives largely apart. *The Departed* condenses these two women into a single figure, Madolyn, a psychiatrist who treats Costigan while living with Sullivan. This narrative adjustment pits the two male leads against one another in direct emotional rivalry, weaving two separate intimate plotlines into a compact romantic triangle that heightens the dramatic weight of betrayal and revelation.

The moral universe shifts accordingly. *Infernal Affairs* operates within a karmic cosmos—the title invokes the Buddhist continuous hell, a realm of unending suffering for those who betray conscience. Characters are caught in a moral order they cannot escape. *The Departed* replaces this vertical, metaphysical framework with a horizontal, institutional one. Evil is not cosmic but systemic: the church, the police, and the political establishment are all compromised. The rat on the balcony in the final shot symbolizes not individual moral failure but an entire environment crawling with corruption [13]. The adaptation's core proposition thus shifts decisively—from karmic retribution and inescapable hell to identity crisis and institutional critique—and this shift is made credible precisely because every preceding layer has already been rebuilt to support it.

5. The spectator imagination layer: indeterminacies refilled

Ingarden's fourth stratum—the stratum of schematized aspects—concerns what the work leaves open, the gaps and indeterminacies that only the spectator's imagination can complete. In literature, these gaps are filled through the reader's mental images; in cinema, they take the form of what is withheld from the frame, left ambiguous in narrative resolution, or suggested rather than stated. This layer is arguably where cross-cultural adaptation faces its most delicate task, because what a culture leaves unsaid is often as defining as what it insists on articulating.

Infernal Affairs is a film built substantially out of such gaps. Its most famous scene—the rooftop confrontation—derives its power less from what is spoken than from what hangs in the air. When Lau confesses, "I want to be a good man," Chan replies with a line almost cruelly open: "Say it to the judge." The film does not tell us whether Chan believes him, whether redemption is possible, or whether Lau's suffering constitutes atonement. It simply leaves the question there, a moral wound the viewer must dress alone. As Marchetti observes, *Infernal Affairs* repeatedly "refuses narrative closure, insisting that moral ambiguity is the only honest resolution" [11]. The film invites an active spectator who can tolerate lingering narrative ambiguity and embrace unresolved ethical questions.

The Departed takes an almost opposite approach, not out of artistic failing but out of cultural coherence. Where the Hong Kong original holds back, Scorsese's film shows. Where the original leaves moral judgment suspended, the American version anchors it. The most representative example lies in the rat darting across Costigan's balcony in the final shot, layered against the Boston skyline: an overt visual metaphor that explicitly signals the institutional pervasion of corruption. The metaphor is no longer buried; it is literally framed for the viewer [13]. The indeterminacy that gives *Infernal Affairs* its haunting power is, in *The Departed*, resolved into indictment.

This divergence extends beyond the final shot. Throughout *Infernal Affairs*, the mole's psychological state is rendered through what the camera withholds—unseen therapist's notes, conversations just outside the frame, silences that stretch beyond naturalism. The viewer is asked to complete these spaces. *The Departed*, by contrast, makes the therapeutic process explicit: Madolyn's

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sessions with Costigan are shown in detail and his anxieties are articulated and clinically framed. What one film protects as mystery, the other offers as evidence.

The two films' differing treatments of indeterminacies can be more precisely explained through reception aesthetics. Drawing on Ingarden's concept of "indeterminate spots," Wolfgang Iser developed the notion of the "appeal structure," arguing that blanks are not deficiencies but necessary conditions that stimulate the recipient's participation in meaning construction—the more blanks, the deeper the involvement [14]. This theoretical logic is equally applicable to film discourse. *Infernal Affairs*' appeal structure presupposes a reception tradition accustomed to grasping meaning "in what is left unsaid," a tradition with deep aesthetic roots in East Asian culture—from the blank spaces in landscape painting to the aftertaste of haiku. American mainstream audiences, however, have long been trained by Hollywood's narrative conventions favoring clear information and explicit emotional cues. Zhang Chunmian points out that remakes must recalibrate the "density of blanks" according to the target audience's reception habits, or risk "cultural indigestion" [15]. Zhang Yue further argues that The Departed's filling of the blanks is not a matter of aesthetic superiority but a strategic response to cultural discounting—a process of transforming metaphors that Eastern viewers complete on their own into externalized narrative information familiar to Western audiences [16].

Thus, the success of *The Departed* at this layer lies in its willingness to fill the gaps that *Infernal Affairs* carefully carved out—but to fill them with material native to its own cultural psychology. Mainstream American cinema is inherently incompatible with prolonged narrative ambiguity, as its canonical narrative traditions prioritize narrative resolution, textual explication, and transparent moral legibility. Rather than fight this inheritance, *The Departed* works within it, trading metaphysical open-endedness for institutional critique and psychological realism. The spectator it summons is not the contemplative witness that *Infernal Affairs* addresses, but a juror asked to reach a verdict—and that spectator finds, in the closing rat and the collapsing infrastructure of church and state, a resolution that feels earned because it speaks in a cinematic language the culture already knows how to hear.

6. Conclusion

This research aims to investigate the mechanisms of cross-cultural film adaptation at a structural dimension beneath mere plot reproduction. Drawing on Ingarden's four-layer ontology and translating it into a cinematic framework, the analysis traced cultural translation across four interconnected strata in *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed*. The findings demonstrate that *The Departed* succeeded not through plot fidelity, but through systematic cultural transformation: at the audiovisual layer, restrained stillness gave way to street-level energy; at the montage layer, accumulative editing was replaced by percussive cutting; at the story world layer, the undercover dilemma was recoded from identity dissolution into class mobility, and the moral universe shifted from karmic retribution to institutional critique; at the imagination layer, metaphysical ambiguity was resolved into directorial indictment. These four layers do not operate in isolation—each layer's conversion provides the conditions for the next, forming a coherent translation ecology that progressively displaced the original's implicit, fatalistic aesthetic with an explicit, critical American system. The study thus offers a structural alternative to the fidelity-betrayal dichotomy and a replicable model for analyzing adaptation as multi-level cultural translation.

This study carries several inherent limitations worthy of discussion. The model does not fully capture performance, whose cultural specificity resists neat stratification. This research is confined to pure textual analysis and lacks empirical data to verify the divergent receptive experiences of

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Hong Kong and American audiences toward the two works. Furthermore, the analysis is confined to a single pair of films, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating reception studies—audience surveys or ethnographic work—to test whether the layer-level translations identified here correspond to divergent spectatorial responses. The model could also be applied to other cross-cultural adaptations, such as remakes of *Seven Samurai* or *La Femme Nikita*, as well as domestic Chinese practices like *12 Citizens (2014)* and *Sheep Without a Shepherd (2019)*, to further refine its analytical precision and cross-cultural applicability.

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