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Hidden Differences: New meanings in adaptations of literature to the screen

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Synopsis

Approaches to screen adaptation which either accept or reject 'fidelity' effectively hide from view the interrelations of difference that can be observed between literary and visual works of art. Further, comparative reading of a literary precursor and its screen adaptation alone hides from view the interrelations of difference between those and other works. By focusing on difference, screen adaptations can be viewed and read together with literary precursors and other intertextual influences to produce new stories that would otherwise remain hidden. This method of textual analysis, 'differential reading', is explained by reference to three screen adaptations, clustered around themes of unrequited love and rejection, which illustrate general insights into theoretical issues. When viewed and read together, differences can be observed between these works which produce new meanings. When one switches between the possibilities such new meanings create, views of the world embedded in the respective works are destabilised.

Hidden Differences: New meanings in adaptations of literature to the screen

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Introduction

Approaches to screen adaptation which either accept or reject 'fidelity' in its various forms effectively hide from view the 'interrelations of difference' that can be observed between literary and visual works of art. As James Naremore observes, approaches to screen adaptation have tended to divide between two opposites (Naremore, 2000, 8). The first is a 'translational' approach which focuses on textual transfer and cinematic equivalence (or in other words, reproduction of the same). The second is the generation of difference through endless repetition and recycling (Naremore, 2000, 15). In the first part of this paper I will show that this opposition hides the 'interrelations of difference' between literary precursor and screen adaptation. I argue in a forthcoming article referenced below that sameness and difference are not binary opposites, and that one may rehabilitate the study of difference without resorting to ideas of fidelity.
Further, approaches to screen adaptation which focus on comparative reading of a literary precursor and its screen adaptation hide from view the interrelations of difference between those and other works. Such approaches have been criticised on the grounds they lead back to ‘fidelity’ and also because they exclude consideration of other intertextual influences that may inform a reading/viewing (Robert Stam 2005: 27, Linda Hutcheon 2006: xiii and Sarah Cardwell 2007: 52). However, there is a lack of consensus as to the nature of relevant intertextual relationships and the way they may inform a reading of a particular work of art (see for example William Irwin 2001, 2004 and Gregory Machacek 2007). In the second part of this paper I will show how interrelations of difference may elucidate the concept of intertextual influences and inform viewing a screen adaptation together with intertextual influences beyond the literary precursor to reveal new meanings.

By focussing on difference, screen adaptations can be viewed and read together with literary precursors and other intertextual influences to produce new stories that would otherwise remain hidden. This method of textual analysis, 'differential reading', is explained by reference to three films adapted from narrative poems and a short story respectively: Onegin (Martha Fiennes, 1999), The Monkey’s Mask (Samantha Lang, 2002) and Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005). These case studies are clustered around themes of unrequited love and rejection and illustrate general insights into theoretical issues. This selection also takes up the suggestion by a number of thinkers that examples should be studied beyond the narrow but predominant focus of 'novel to film' in the literature (see for example Naremore 2000: 1).

Intertextual influences considered include the respective literary precursors, narrative poems by Alexander Pushkin and Dorothy Porter, and Annie Proulx's short story, as well as relevant intertextual influences from literature and screen, from eighteenth century epistolary novels to early twentieth century novels about doomed relationships. When viewed and read together, differences can be observed between these works which produce new meanings. When one switches between the possibilities such new meanings create, views of the world embedded in the respective works are destabilised, and hidden stories emerge. In the third part of this paper I will consider certain views of the world that have been observed in these works, and how these are affected by bringing 'difference' into view.

Screen adaptation as a vector

The first film sequence for consideration is the closing sequence in Onegin. Pushkin tells us very little about the room in which Onegin confronts Tatyana, and focuses on the dialogue, leaving the reader with the image of the crestfallen Onegin as the sound of the General's footsteps approaches. Pushkin the poet/narrator then closes the story with a fond farewell to the characters he has grown close to over the years of writing, and other absent friends who...
have passed from his life.

The film creates a setting for this sequence, in which Tatyana's distance from Onegin, in all senses, is emphasised visually by the white décor, her white gown, and Onegin's dark bulk. There are slight changes in dialogue: Tatyana no longer defiantly says 'Why should I lie' when asked if she still loves him (my translation). Instead Onegin presses her for an answer, asking her to lie to him. The delicious comedy and ambiguity of Pushkin's closing is replaced with a shot of a broken Onegin walking away down an almost empty street, with an image of death provided by a coffin on a sleigh.

The next sequence is from The Monkey's Mask. In Porter's narrative poem the private detective Jill (Susie Porter) meets the killer Nick (Marton Csokas) and in the course of a discussion in her car at night, during which he attempts to seduce her, she extracts a confession from him, then fights him off when his caresses become threatening.

The dialogue in the film is virtually the same, however, the setting and visual feel of the sequence is changed to an overcast day by the sea, the only daytime sequence in the film not shot in perfect sunny conditions. In the film (unlike the poem) Jill has taped the confession. After delivering the incriminating tapes to the police, Jill proceeds to report to her clients (the victim's parents) and to meet with her former lover Diana (Nick's wife and accomplice in the murder) as she does in the poem, without in any way adverting to the taped confession. The meeting with Diana is shot with virtually the same dialogue, that is, absent Jill's internal thoughts which show she would continue the relationship if Diana would have her back, but in a setting provided by an installation work in the
would have her back, but in a setting provided by an installation work in the Art Gallery of New South Wales which provides a visual image of a web of deception.

The closing image of the film is of Jill standing by the harbour as sunlight reflects on the water, her inner reflections about the victim disclosed by voiceover. She disappears as focus is pulled, suggesting that she, like the victim, passes into memory. In the narrative poem, this sequence occurs in the rain, with Jill angrily reflecting on her failed relationship with Diana, and memories receding of the victim, who Jill never met.

The final sequence I want to discuss is the closing sequence in *Brokeback Mountain*. The film leaves us where Proulx's short story starts, with Ennis many years later contemplating the shirts they wore the summer they worked together on the high mountain pastures.

The short story mentions that Ennis needs a permanent place to live, and might have to stay with his recently married daughter. The film starts this sequence with the daughter visiting Ennis to invite him to her wedding. At first he makes an excuse not to attend, then says he will and produces some wine to toast her engagement.
When she leaves, he realises she has left behind her cardigan, and carefully folds it and places it in a cupboard pending her return, and the boys' shirts are revealed when he opens the cupboard door.

I will return below to discuss the meanings produced by these differences and the effect of switching between them. For present purposes I suggest that these sequences show that it is virtually impossible to separate the translation of literary text to the screen from the effect of textual revisions, and that 'difference' results inextricably from both.

The above diagram shows that one would have to create a hypothetical 'film of the book' or 'book of the film' if one were to attempt to distinguish differences generated by revision from differences generated by transposition. I argue in a forthcoming article referenced below that sameness and difference are not binary opposites, and that transposition of the same, or cinematic equivalence, are both consistent with 'difference' because the criteria of comparison are many and varied (or, as Thomas Van Parys has recently put it, 'fidelity is not homogeneous' – 2007: 2).

**Interrelations of difference**

The approach I am advocating can be called 'differential reading' to distinguish it from 'comparative reading', about which some reservations have been expressed as noted above. The principal reservation with comparative reading is that it excludes attention to 'intertextual influences' other than the precursor literary work (Stam, 2005, 27). Stam suggests that 'virtually all films, not only adaptations, re-makes, and sequels, are mediated through intertextuality' (Stam, 2005, 45). According to Stam, intertextual influences 'reach the text not only through recognizable influences but also through a subtle process of dissemination' (Stam, 1989, 15, 2005, 27). However, as noted above, the term 'intertextuality' can be used to refer to a variety of textual interrelations, the relevance of which to a particular reading may be contested. Accordingly, it is desirable to define what we mean by an 'intertextual influence' and the mechanism by which such influences may inform our viewing of a screen adaptation.
In the context of screen adaptation, it does not seem to be contested that one may have regard to the literary precursor, and if that is permitted arguably the study of sources should be open without limitation as these may influence reading/viewing. However, 'source study' is generally denigrated by thinkers who endorse intertextuality (see for example, Roland Barthes, 1977, 160, Julia Kristeva, 1984, 60, Jonathan Culler, 2001, 114). The original use of the term 'intertextuality' referred not to relations between texts but to the participation of a text in the 'discursive space of a culture' (Culler, 2001,114). In Barthes' terminology such a 'Text' is a 'methodological field' rather than a book (Barthes, 1977, 157).

Difficulty is also encountered with brief allusions to other works. For example, William Irwin argues that it is permissible to have regard to other works of art only when the author has made an intentional allusion to such other work in a way that 'calls for further associations' by the reader (Irwin, 2001, 290). On this view, it is not legitimate to find 'all sorts of connections between … texts that the author did not intend to suggest', that is, the reader cannot legitimately 'call to mind anything at all' (Irwin, 2001, 293). However, Irwin does not elucidate the way in which the reader may read the work informed by these 'further associations'.

In a subsequent article, Irwin sums up 'intertextuality' as an ontological proposition that 'all texts derive their meaning only through their relations to other texts' (Irwin, 2004, 229). He argues that interpretations which result from such a wide view have no value, being idiosyncratic speculations with no other basis than 'This reminds me of that and so on' (Irwin, 2004, 236). However, if one wishes to study the mechanism by which two or more works of art can be read and viewed together I suggest there is no reason to exclude more subtle disseminations.

Sarah Cardwell suggests that genre may be more important than the relationship between a screen adaptation and its literary precursor (Cardwell 2007: 56; see also Hutcheon 2006: 121). Certainly genre will be relevant, although it may not be possible to reliably assess the extent of its importance relative to other factors. But how does one deal with intertextual influences that operate across genre? For example, would it be legitimate to view *Onegin* informed by *The Maltese Falcon* (Dashiell Hammett 1966), or to view *Brokeback Mountain* informed by *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald 2000), and if it were legitimate, how would one go about such a reading/viewing?

Leo Braudy takes an approach which could usefully be applied across genre when he suggests that film remakes concern themselves with 'unfinished cultural business' (Braudy 1998: 331). Accordingly, one could refer to themes of unrequited love and rejection, rather than 'genre', to inform a viewing of the films mentioned above. As I have said above, the case studies are clustered around these themes. I want to acknowledge the use of the term 'cluster' by...
around these themes. I want to acknowledge the use of the term *cluster* by Professor Svend Erik Larsen in his paper at the Double Dialogues conference. Apparently 'cluster' is used in its ordinary meaning and is not yet a term of art. The word I think is apt to describe works of art across genres and literary and visual forms that may be read and viewed together informatively.

For present purposes, I propose to go further than Cardwell and Braudy in defining 'intertextual influences' that may inform a viewing of screen adaptations. I suggest that any literary or screen work has meaning as a stand-alone work of art, and is also to be distinguished from all other works of art through 'differences' that can be observed. That is, a work of art is uniquely characterised not only by what it is, but by how it differs from every other work of art. In principle, therefore, there is no need to construct rules regarding 'allusion' or 'genre' which define the classes of other works of art one is permitted or not permitted to have regard to when reading or viewing a particular work of art. Accordingly, in the context of screen adaptation, 'intertextual influences' are literary or visual works that may inform reading/viewing through relations of difference. Our 'methodological field' is the 'field of difference' in which a screen adaptation and other literary and visual works of art are situated.

I want now to consider some examples of intertextual influences in the case of the films mentioned above. Pushkin makes a number of references in *Eugene Onegin* to Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* (Rousseau 1997). In the film, Tatyana is shown reading a book on a sunny day.

There follows a brief extreme close-up of the title page. An observant viewer might see that the book is Rousseau's epistolary novel. How is one's viewing of the film to be informed by this? I will suggest an answer below, but first want to consider some other cases.

In *Brokeback Mountain* there is a shot of Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) high on the hill and looking out towards the sea. This image is reminiscent of the opening image in *Eugene Onegin*. There is also an image of two men standing in a field with trees in the background, similar to the famous image of two men standing in a field in *Eugene Onegin*.
mountain with the flock in the moonlight, followed by a shot presumed to be from his point of view looking down the valley to the pinprick of light from the fire made by Ennis (Heath Ledger) at the low camp. Proulx's short story states that Jack 'saw Ennis as night fire, a red spark on the huge black mass of mountain' (Proulx 2006: 4). May one read this as an allusion to Gatsby standing in the moonlight looking at the green light across the bay which, like Daisy, 'must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it' (Fitzgerald 2000: 171)?

The final example is the sequence in The Maltese Falcon (John Huston, 1941) in which Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor) that she is going to take the fall because he won't play the sap for her.

Sam's coolly rational rejection of Brigid is more reminiscent of Tatyana's rejection of Onegin than Jill's final encounter with Diana in The Monkey's Mask (although The Maltese Falcon and The Monkey's Mask are both in the 'private detective' genre). Applying the reasoning of thinkers such as William Irwin, one could not legitimately read/view Pushkin's novel together with Fiennes' film or The Maltese Falcon because Pushkin did not allude to them (see Irwin 2004: 236).

Irwin might be prepared to acknowledge, however, that Proulx unconsciously may have alluded to The Great Gatsby (see Irwin 2001: 291). Larry McMurtry, co-screenwriter of Brokeback Mountain, observes that the protagonists follow a 'long American tradition of doomed young men' created by such authors as Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway (McMurtry 2005: 140). However, as I mention above, I am not so much interested in whether Proulx or McMurtry were influenced by The Great Gatsby or not, but in how intertextual influences inform a reading/viewing.

I suggest that, when one adopts as one's methodological field the 'field of difference' in which works of art are distinguished by their differences it is not necessary to find connections in order to identify 'intertextual influences' which may legitimately inform reading/viewing.

**Differential reading**

We have a cluster of literary and screen works in which an 'Onegin figure' (of either gender or sexual orientation) is rejected by an actual or desired lover. 'Eugene Onegin' has been portrayed by Pushkin (and each of his many
Eugene Onegin has been portrayed by Pushkin (and each of his many translators, some of whom are referenced below) in his narrative poem, Tchaikovsky in his opera, and Fiennes in her film. Fitzgerald's 'Jay Gatsby' and Porter's 'Jill Fitzpatrick' fall into this category. However, it is the 'relations of difference' between these portrayals which interests me, and the possibilities created as one switches between the literary and visual portrayals and their differences. In the space available, I will give detailed consideration to only one of these characters.

In the film *The Monkey's Mask*, Jill conforms to genre by coolly solving the murder mystery and walking away from Diana, much like Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Yet it is Jill who has been rejected, and in the narrative poem we see a character who does not conform to the 'hard boiled detective' genre, who desires to continue a love affair with Diana despite the knowledge that Diana is involved in the murder and concealment of the murderer. To continue such an affair may challenge a view of the world in which people should not be allowed to get away with murder. It may also be unwise, contrary to one's self-interest, having regard to the possibility that one may end up a victim of one's partner if such an affair continues.

The screen visualisation of the sequence in which Jill tapes Nick's confession is radically different from the rest of the film, in lighting and setting, and together with the subsequent sequences between Jill and the victim's parents, and Jill and Diana, where no reference is made to the confession, lead one to consider the possibility that the victorious ending in which Jill delivers the confession to the police is a dream ending, a figment of Jill's imagination at the moment of her death at Nick's hands, reminiscent of *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2002). Switching between the various portrayals may therefore diminish our confidence that the ending of the film, in which Jill is portrayed as 'hard boiled', is convincing, and the possibility of hidden stories may emerge.

In this cluster of literary and screen works we also have a 'Tatyana figure' (of either gender or sexual orientation) who rejects an actual or would-be lover. Rousseau's 'Julie', Pushkin's 'Tatyana' and the 'Tatyana' of Fiennes' film. Fitzgerald's 'Daisy' and Proulx's 'Ennis'. And 'Sam Spade' of *The Maltese Falcon*. There is a fine line between a world view in which love and honour are paramount, and a world in which one is determined by others, through duty or obligation, to one's detriment. I will give detailed consideration only to Tatyana and Ennis, but first want to note Proulx's portrayal of 'Alma' and Porter's portrayal of 'Diana'. Both characters appear to act purely out of self-interest, without malice toward the person they reject.

For Alma, she recognises that Ennis cannot support the children she has and wants to have, and that he does not return her love, so she leaves him. Diana has kept Jill close so Diana can protect herself and her husband from being detected as the murderers, and ends the relationship when this purpose is no longer served. These portrayals are similar to the coolly rational Sam Spade, weighing up what is good for him and good for everybody (except of course
the rejected lover, who by her transgression has forfeited a right to our sympathy).

So we come to Pushkin's portrayal of Tatyana, by all the means available to him through his art. One might infer, on the basis of several critical references Pushkin makes in his narrative poem to Rousseau, that Pushkin would react in his portrayal of Tatyana against Rousseau's portrayal of Julie as a person who renounced her former lover out of duty and obligation to her family, though she still loved him until her dying day. However, as Nabokov notes, most critics regard the closing sequence of the novel as an unequivocal demonstration of Tatyana's virtue (although Nabokov on the contrary reads Tatyana's tearful admission of love as a suggestion that she offers Onegin hope, and that she will relent) (Nabokov 1975: 241). The film appears to foreclose this possibility, as Onegin gains no solace, and leaves a broken man. In the film, Tatyana explains that she has given her word to her husband, and will remain faithful, it seems out of respect for herself and her word. The dialogue from Pushkin's text, where she defiantly says 'Why should I lie' is omitted, and one may wonder why the character would admit her love at the same time as she declares she will withhold it.

By reading and viewing these works together one can read Tatyana's final rejection of Onegin as demonstrating both virtuousness and (through that virtue) vindictiveness, which can be distinguished from the altruism of Julie in *The New Heloise* and the self-interest of Diana in *The Monkey's Mask* in rejecting respective lovers without any hint of malice. Switching between the various portrayals may therefore diminish our confidence that the ending of the film, and the ending of the narrative poem, in which Tatyana is portrayed as 'virtuous', is convincing, and the possibility of hidden stories emerges.

Now to the portrayal of Ennis, who rejected Jack's proposal that they live together, but carried on a clandestine love affair with Jack over twenty years. Diana Ossana, co-screenwriter of *Brokeback Mountain*, observes that, unlike a novel, which must be selectively cut back to adapt to the screen, Proulx's short story provided the 'blueprint' for the screenplay, which the screenwriters had only to 'expand and build upon' (Ossana 2005: 145-146). McMurtry says they followed 'the clear track of the story, augmenting and amplifying, adding texture and substance where necessary' (McMurtry 2005: 140). This film accordingly provides a unique case study, in which the screenwriters have, so they say, attempted to be faithful to the short story. My theory suggests that, even in such a limit case, differences or mutations will inevitably arise, which will create new meanings regardless of what the filmmakers may or may not have intended.

The short story tells us the boys are 'inured to the stoic life' (Proulx 1997: 2). This is picked up in stage directions (McMurtry & Ossana 2005: 1) but principally demonstrated by Ennis saying, as he does in the short story, that 'if you can't fix it you gotta stand it' (McMurtry & Ossana 2005: 54). This world view leaves open a key question of how one makes decisions and choices
about what can be fixed and what cannot. Alma, by contrast, decides that their relationship cannot be fixed, and makes her choice to leave.

A number of other world views have been apprehended in *Brokeback Mountain*. William Leung suggests that the film re-works and normalises the 'queer' genre by focussing on love, loss and longing rather than the same-sex relationship of the protagonists (Leung 2008: 25). As Leung notes, the film has been criticised for arguably reducing the story to a couple of middle-aged men with unsatisfactory family lives trying to recapture lost youth (Leung 2008: 25-27). Christian Draz, on the other hand, argues it is the short story that portrays the protagonists' same-sex love as 'normal' and that the film, despite an apparent attempt to faithfully embrace the story 'turns Jack into a predator, Ennis into a victim, and their passion into a kind of prison' (Draz 2006: 12).

The short story and film touch upon the relationship of the protagonists with their respective fathers. Jane Rose and Joanne Urschel, for example, argue that the cause of the tragedy is a combination of repressive social forces and the relationship of the protagonists with their respective fathers (Rose & Urschel 2006: 248). As Michael Cobb observes, the film portrays the sons as experiencing a damaging same-sex attraction because of their family relationships during childhood, which militates against a view of the world in which a person is 'born gay' (Cobb 2007: 104). Dwight McBride argues that the cause of the tragedy is repressive social forces (McBride 2007: 96; see also Jennifer Wallace 2007: 157).

I suggest that a 'differential reading' of the film in relation to the short story and other intertextual influences subverts the views of the world which are said to be portrayed in the film and short story. One should not forget that the story is fictional, and that the characters and worlds they inhabit are a work of art constructed by writer and filmmakers with all the devices of their art at their disposal. Rose and Urschel read the short story and film together, but as a composite work in which differences, or mutations, are ignored. They read the composite work as if the characters were real, and the work tells us something about the real world. One could infer that the author has attempted to explain each character's conduct, and the filmmaker has done likewise, but in so doing differences or mutations arise that destabilise the views of the world created by each, at the same time as their creations are differentiated as separate and distinct works of art.

Aristotle says that 'tragedy' occurs only when suffering is undeserved, due to a serious error which could befall a person like us (Aristotle 1996: 21). He also says that character is revealed by a person's deliberate choices, and that 'the character is good if the choice is good' (Aristotle 1996: 24). Ennis falls into error when his stoicism leads him to conclude he has no choice but to continue with both his marriage and his clandestine relationship with Jack. Ennis's tragedy is that he does not make a choice and the direction of his life is determined by the choices of others: Alma decides to leave him for a man who will support her and the children she desires; Jack decides to seek a life with
will support her and the children she desires, Jack decides to seek a life with another man, which leads to his death. These are errors a person can make regardless of one's sexual orientation. This does not make Ennis a victim nor Jack a predator, nor either prisoners of anything but their own human errors.

While Draz regards the film's ending as an unwelcome validation of Ennis's heterosexual union (Draz 2006: 13), it may simply be a minor step to assuaging his guilt over the choices he made in his conduct towards his wife and children. Switching between the various portrayals of 'Tatyana figures' mentioned above may therefore diminish our confidence that the film, and the short story, in which Ennis is portrayed as a victim of circumstance, is convincing, and the possibility of a hidden story emerges which reduces our confidence in the various views of the world apprehended in the works.

**Conclusion**

The effect of 'difference' has been hidden by approaches based on 'fidelity', and equally, approaches which reject 'fidelity' have tended to hide or overlook the existence of 'difference' and its effect on meaning.

The method of textual analysis I propose, 'differential reading', enables us to apply theories of adaptation and of intertextuality to screen adaptation so we can read/view screen adaptations together with literary precursors and other intertextual influences. The method is based on recognising that screen adaptations are situated in a 'field of difference', and so informs our understanding of adaptation and intertextuality generally. While this approach is not directly concerned with the production of adaptations, it does have implications which may inform the choices made in future by adapters of literature to film.

Authors attempt to explain a character's conduct, and filmmakers do likewise, with all the devices of their arts at their disposal, but in so doing differences or mutations arise that produce new meanings and destabilise views of the world created by each, at the same time as their creations are differentiated as separate and distinct works of art. In this way hidden stories emerge.

**Works Cited**


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Acknowledgments

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