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Narrative Dynamics, Adaptive Practices

Fragmentary, Circular and Indirect Pathways
from Literary Source to Filmic Adaptation.

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Introduction

This thesis describes a series of narrative dynamics occurring in novel to film adaptations. It is especially concerned with adaptive practices that favour digressive, heterogeneous, subjective and composite approaches to the appropriation of source materials and their transmedial development. Overall, this work seeks to chart how narrative iterations and thematic repetition are executed beyond a plot-based adaptation standard, for instance, by means of multi-sourced borrowings, or original additions aiming towards non-hierarchical relationships between literary and filmic products. The thesis is composed of three chapters: an introductory literature review and two case studies.

Chapter 1 surveys a series of theoretical contributions, both contemporary and developed during the twentieth century, dealing with theories of narrativity, the purpose and functioning of narrative expression, and the notion of “story” across media. Starting with an appraisal of “make-believe theory” and “literary humanism”, it goes on to assess four key elements of narrative structures – voice, system, subject, context – each via an illustration of the main contributions by a different thinker – Bakhtin, Lotman, Kristeva and Hall. The chapter ends with a comparative outline of different modes for the understanding of adaptation, which, it argues, can exist as a retelling or as a recreation of existing material. The case-study chapters tackle the overarching theme of adaptation in two complementary ways. Chapter 2 follows a “vertical” path, whereby a single creator’s adaptive practice is assessed in its multiple demonstrations across a series of independent titles. Chapter 3 looks at a “horizontal” distribution of signification when a single title is repeatedly adapted by different agents across several media, languages, epochs and locations.

Chapter 2 focuses on the work of director Jane Campion, privileging the “period” triptych within her larger corpus, that is, a series of costume films set in the nineteenth century:

The Piano, a composite appropriation of tropes and unacknowledged sources; *The Portrait of a Lady*, a deceptively straightforward adaptation from a novel; *Bright Star*, a reversal of factual sources to create an alternative biopic. Chapter 3 presents the adaptation history of the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë through the lens of setting and ambiance, in lieu of character-driven plot development. Therefore, the treatment of background nature, human-animal relationships, land ownership and local specificity, as refracted across media, time and locale, are placed centre-stage, with Andrea Arnold's 2011 film *Wuthering Heights* being given particular attention for its environmental sensibility. Moreover, recurring themes emerge from case-study discussions: women's agency in social and artistic settings, the representation of labour, the expression of historical awareness, the creation of non-verbal, non-scholarly tactics to hand down human knowledge, the role ascribed to nature and the non-human in fictional narratives, the impact and influence of Anglophone cultures within a global context.

In my attempt to understand how adaptation from page to screen functions, and what it entails for the connected, yet independent, works it produces, I willingly positioned myself on the outside looking in, skirting the book-film periphery: a position that allowed me to take into account the well-known, traditional and "proper" adaptations as well as browsing the murky territory where adaptation becomes palimpsest and philological rigour gives way to popular and commercial rewriting. Above all, I wanted to, alternately, orient myself towards the subject doing the adaptation, and towards the object being adapted. Hence my choice to feature as case studies, in a hybrid format, a single director and a single title, rather than adopting a purely monographic approach to Jane Campion, or compiling a selection with regards to *Wuthering Heights*. Following how one author develops their adaptation practice throughout a series of adapted works generates a top-down analysis, an overview gathering different texts to compare the specifics of the adaptation methodology that they do (or do not) share. Conversely, to focus on one single title to build its genealogy, from the ur-text to its fragmented, multi-media adaptations, generates a rhizomatic family of interconnected works, and allows the space to sketch some hypothesis as to how adaptations influence, from the bottom-up, the reception and status of their original source. While multi-directional, my

approach rejects hierarchical directives: for instance, I do not uphold “fidelity” as a critical standard, rather, I attempt to present my thinking about the case studies as a horizontal sequence of connections, a reading of intertextualities and, often, as a mere attempt to find my way through a gallery of distorting and magnifying mirrors. My interest in specifically “period” or “costume” adaptations – i.e. films that recreate an historical ambiance, often and purportedly parallel to the timing and context of the novel they are based on – was a crucial criteria when selecting my case studies. How do films influence our present understanding of the past? How do costume and set-design concur in fostering certain stereotypes about how life felt and looked like in a past era? How does a visual *mise-en-scène* contribute to create false memories, unreachable expectations, biased interpretations about their literary sources? Can film adaptations revise, update, even bend the content of an established text to create new meaning for contemporary audiences? Such questions spurred me to embark on this research, and while I do not claim to have come any closer to answering them, they have certainly shaped and informed the way I conducted my thinking.

This thesis employs a mixed methodology. Trade paper articles, newspaper reviews, online commentary and popular sources are considered and quoted alongside textual elements from primary textual and filmic sources, as well as scholarly analyses. This stance is also highly informed by a series of setbacks and unforeseen logistical obstacles brought forth by the global Covid-19 pandemic: the near-impossible availability of physical access to libraries and in-person meetings were further aggravated by personal discomfort and increased difficulties with regards to the management of healthcare on a national, local and individual level. As in daily life under lockdown, the locus of signification in cultural products shifted from the material towards the virtual, and similar patterns occurring in the transmission of traditional, canonical and popular stories became all the more apparent for their capability to maintain their relevance by adapting and adjusting to the specifics of new media and new ideas. Moreover, the ongoing health crisis confirmed my idea of research (both personal and academic) as a realm that cannot disregard the importance and influence of the researcher’s body at each stage of the process, from the material drafting to the political scope detectable in the finalised work. The imperative upkeep of menial, conservative

care-work during times of general lockdown and individual isolation that mainly befell, unchallenged and unrewarded, on women, echoed the acts described narratively in the works I was analysing, and further enhanced their cultural assignment as a particularly “feminine” line of employment, let alone duty. Domesticity as a site of labour, as well as a potential generator of narrative development, therefore, gained a specific, literal meaning. It was paramount to my research methodology, from the beginning, to feature as much work made by woman-identified writers, filmmakers, thinkers and academics as possible. Over time, it unfolded as a speculative necessity that eventually overcame any essentialist notions about this classification, however loose it had been since the start. The distinctly feminist bent which is embedded in my own critical approach, in fact, is not limited to a mere sex-based census: the philosophical and political quests that I aim to contribute to through my scholarship is less concerned with issues of equality and representation than with the redistribution of resources, both material and intellectual. Hence the focus on the translating efforts performed on bodily, material performances described, or implied, in literary sources (alongside word-based exchanges) when the adaptation leads to their visualisation. Resisting stances towards unpalatable ideological content stored in the texts are, hopefully, appeased by a willingness to engage with the givens in order to gauge the critical distance, and eventually perform a critical interrogation more akin to a congenial, unsuspecting description of a series of works that, it is important to state, fundamentally brought me great pleasure.

Rita Felski’s arguments, in her book *The Limits of Critique* (2015), for the enlargement of conventional approaches to the critical act were illuminating and impactful. The idea that critical writing should entail the attempt to string together evidence, reasoning, contextual assessment and interpretation within a logical structure – one, moreover, closely related to storytelling for its captivating power – is but one of many potential ways to practice criticism, Felski argues. The “suspicion” that accompanies the enquiring drive in modern critical studies, whereby the text is posited as a mysterious, unyielding object whose underpinnings and complicities need to be uncovered, and dutifully accounted for theoretically and historically, is allegedly proving an insufficient mode of intellectual exercise within the humanities. The engagement that Felski

suggests, on the other hand, is a stance that does aim to extract the moral capability tucked away in the text in order to divulge it to the untrained reader, rather, it acknowledges ways to read (and, I would add, watch and listen to) that are better understood and felt via one's willingness to experience shock, emotion, analogy, enchantment, (vicarious) pleasures or distress, and so forth. I recognised many of the alternative modes of engagement that Felski indicates in the adaptive operations I describe: as foundational components of each story migrate from one adaptation to the next, the load of original and ancillary material they generate and spread, along with the main treatment of the source, often seems better experienced, let alone assessed, via analytic pathways that eschew the logical modes of standard critique. Rather, certain visual aesthetic choices, certain small twists on a character's demeanour, certain implications suggested by colour, voice, or composition seem to require one's willingness to respond physically and emotionally, to prioritise one's memory and intuition over rigour and detachment. The mere fact that, as I was writing about the styling of natural spaces on screen and hapticality in human representations interpersonal interactions and outdoor activities were forbidden as preventative health measure, surely attached a whole new layer of meaning to my inquiry, even when the initial longing eventually gave way to desensitization. Moreover, the choice to follow adaptive circuits, I soon discovered, entailed the near-impossible task to present a uniform and cohesive account of the routes taken, let alone finding common ground for their objectives: "adaptation" is neither a genre, nor a technique, hardly a style, yet it contains elements of all the above, and requires them to ascribe to certain conventions in order to be recognised as such.

New Zealand filmmaker Jane Campion has frequently employed adaptation as structural methodology throughout her career. The fact that she has worked within classical "period" adaptations (*The Piano*, *Bright Star*, *The Portrait of a Lady*) as well as filmic subjects that are now borderline "period" aesthetic – such as *In the Cut*, shot in 2003 and based on Susanna Moore's eponymous 1995 novel, and *An Angel at My Table*, shot in 1990 and based on New Zealand writer Janet Frame's biography of the same title, which covers her life from her childhood during the 1930's up to her (then) present days in the late 1980's – allowed me to compare and contrast her approach to a

“historical” subject matter with her approach to fictional worlds more familiar to, and possibly better understandable for her contemporary audiences. I focus on Campion’s three “period” or “costume” features – *The Piano* (1993), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) and *Bright Star* (2009) – to observe her multi-sourced and highly subjective approach to inter-media translations. Campion, I argue, is primarily interested in evoking a specific mood with a curated selection of signifiers suggesting the idea of past (or past-ness), tweaking historical accuracy to heighten the film’s potential for sentimentality and visual impact. The literary canon that Campion references is, indeed, manifold, but it is often left unacknowledged in its textual specificities, thus complicating the adaptive customary “one-way” flow into a chain of references that successfully escape authorship, ownership and appropriation. *The Piano*, for instance, is highly receptive to readings that privilege the discussion of sensory perception over the strict analysis of narrative development: as I attempt to do in my discussion, the descriptions of the effects of a mood, of the details that contribute to a filmic atmosphere are viable conduits to gauge the work’s contextual, ideological and historical grounds. *The Portrait of a Lady*, in turn, takes advantage of the popularity of its source novel to carve space out of the narrative core to experiment with genre expectations (specific sequences subvert the fictional period frame), technical materiality and uniformity (b&w and colour shots are both employed) and also, notably, with the very concept of fidelity in adaptation by changing the ending. An analogous twist is that performed in *Bright Star*, a biopic about a poet’s muse arguing for the mutuality of inspiration, in lieu of the traditional bijective gaze thrust upon the quieter, possibly prettier object of desire in art. Campion chooses not to adapt a work of literary fiction, but a series of handwritten private documents – John Keats’ letters to Fanny Brawne –, thus creating a “revisionist” account focusing on an alternative, secondary side of the same story. Overall, Campion appears to work within a visual “past tense” that allows her, and her audiences, to enjoy representations of fictionalised nineteenth centuries while assessing the moral and juridical conditionings at play in the regulation of individual conduct within a changing (evolving?) social and cultural setting.

While Campion’s approach to adaptation provides for a substantially limited field of enquiry, a single title employed as pivot opens the research up to virtually limitless

potentialities. The genealogy of multimedia adaptations based on *Wuthering Heights* reveals a layered infrastructure of adaptations, reworkings, satires, appropriations and works inspired by the novel's eventful human plot. However, other elements of Emily Brontë's source text resurface if the focus is slanted: patterns of affinity and instances of originality can pertain to secondary and background details as well.

The relevance of natural and open spaces in conveying atmosphere, the need for geographical specificity even across national boundaries, the recurring role played by animal and vegetable elements, all contribute to the vocabulary of and surrounding *Wuthering Heights* adaptations. Mine is an attempt in reversing the order of importance in critical evaluation of novel-to-film and film-to-film comparisons, whereby the aspect and role of the background determines the action happening on the foreground as well as the tone and scope of the discussions produced about them. I am interested in how "nature" is conceptualised and depicted, both visually and literarily, and the ensuing ideas about how what is "in the open" relates to humans, especially when those relationships get harnessed in ties of taming, commodification and exploitation. Real-life consequences of cultural operations, such as the gentrification of rural areas, the logistics of filmmaking, and the commercial co-optation of literary tropes, are summarily addressed as worthy components of a critical analysis concerned with the world beyond the page (or the screen).

Andrea Arnold's film adaptation *Wuthering Heights* (2011) is treated as an emblematic example of this approach: the para-documentaristic, quasi a-narrative character of the film is in keeping with eco-conscious sensibilities that seek to downsize human centrality in cultural discourse. Moreover, Arnold demonstrates a way to read (and translate) the source novel that accounts for the cost required by human supremacy: *Wuthering Heights*, in her adaptation, is revitalised as a tale concerned with the legal, cultural, physical management and ownership of space and place. Furthermore, notions of adaptation as translation are tackled via the selection of adaptations that take place in countries that are not Britain, or imagine Britain from the outside: these are the instances that reveal the ultimate role of landscape, nature and the outdoors as loci of signification, imagination, analogy and, potentially, substitution.

The trajectory towards adaptation theory originates in questions regarding how re-telling and re-creating are conducive to migrant narrative forms whose force lies in their paradoxical capability to innovate as they repeat what is familiar. The cultural histories and theories that accompany adaptations seem also involved in shaping the patterns of reference and reaction against sources and other related materials as the appropriating processes continue on. The case studies, therefore, are introduced by a literature review whose main objective is to trace a summary profile of the theories of narrativity that underpin my discussion.

Most of the thinkers I draw from provide insight into questions of “fictionality”, “truthfulness”, how both are understood when referencing the “past”, what roles they come to play when they merge into narrative forms. Theories discussed include Michail Bakhtin’s notions of “chronotope” and “heteroglossia”; Julia Kristeva’s bifurcation between the semiotic and the symbolic in her description of language; Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie’s theories of “make believe” as the basis of narrative expression; the case for the humanist value of literature as discussed by Bernard Harrison and Richard Gaskin; Stuart Hall’s interest into the vernacular side of communication models as enabled by audiovisual technology. Overall, among the recurring themes that connect all the aforementioned systems, is a relevant interest towards a perceived cultural past and its telling modes: historiography, mythological narrative, symbolic parable, genre-specific literary specimen, non-verbal cultural signifiers and instantly recognizable stereotypes. How the past is told, preserved and reused to renew, fortify its meaning, or even as a basis for wholly new signification.

The foundational issue at stake, however, is how to describe what a filmic product does, via its own codes and language, to the literary work it reinterprets, especially when it comes to address medium-specific expressive modalities as well as the narrative content. Adaptations seem especially apt to prioritise subjective understanding, that is, the active *reaction* of the person receiving the original story and therefore *participating* in the reiterative adaptive format. A stance that, as will be discussed, involves makers as well as popular and critical audiences, and which presuppose an experience of shared narrativization on top of unidirectional sense-making practices. Therefore, theoretical approaches that underline features of intermedia adaptations positing the act

as an inherently creative intervention will be privileged over comparative approaches to the subject matter. My own approach to understanding mediated narratives, on the other hand, aims to be flexible enough to recognise and concede the influence, on one's critical output, not only of the original authorial intention, but also the impact of contingent variables, including the experience and sensibility of the critic as a member of a larger audience.

Chapter 1

Stories, Iterations, Adaptations

The task of compiling a literature review about theories of narrativity and the notion of “story” feels somehow less daunting given how self-evidently impossible it is to bring it to completion. The plethora of available material is curtailed by barriers such as language knowledge or proficiency, physical (un)availability of the text, in addition to shifting criteria such as popularity and prestige, pertinence of subject matter, readability and, no less important, personal taste and ideological inclination. Awareness of its gaps and incomplete scope animates the progression of this chapter: its focus switches from the definition of “story”, “narrative” and the acts connected with their creation and utterance, to an approach of the ways stories iterate via adapting mechanisms. This chapter, therefore, should be read as a curated assembly combining the theoretical exercises which helped me clarify – by way of illustration, description, agreement and, often, conflict – my personal stance towards the understanding of narratives and narrativity, whose effects are evident, and come to completion, in the ensuing case-studies chapters.

The opening section attempts a basic outline of theories of narrativity whose ideas provide (partial) explanations to the way “truth”, “fiction” and the “past” are understood, told and shared, and often include suggestions regarding the didactic and/or informative purpose of communicative acts rooted in linguistic narrative modes. Theories discussed include Michail Bakhtin’s notions of “chronotope” and “heteroglossia”; Julia Kristeva’s bifurcation between the semiotic and the symbolic in her description of language; Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie’s theories of “make believe” as the basis of narrative expression; the case for the humanist value of literature as discussed by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, Bernard Harrison and Richard Gaskin; Stuart

Hall's interest into the vernacular side of communication models as enabled by audiovisual technology. The latter part of the chapter tackles narratives beyond point zero of original storytelling: it illustrates theories of adaptation concerned with transmediality, translation, the alleged hierarchy between source and adaptation, fidelity, intervention and the possibility to update the scope of the adapted material. Special treatment will be given to theoretical reflections specifically interested in the relationship between written, language-based texts and visual, filmic objects, while conceding that any theorizing attempt cannot be considered as a precise, or exclusive how-to guide to a specific type of semiotic link.

I acknowledge Walter Benjamin as the main facilitator of my understanding via his celebrated 1936 essay "The Storyteller": his discussion of the storyteller as a floating identity, role, act and technique is, for its conciseness and clarity, one of the most effective theoretical standpoints on the subject of communication as a foremost social act that I so far have encountered. Benjamin's respect for popular, oral sources as the motor of narrativity, his appraisal of wisdom as a form of collective, shareable experience, his description of the continued relevance of stories beyond their topicality, their survival and growth in layers of different narratives are focal points that, as Benjamin traces them in Nikolai Leskov's literary corpus, I am interested in pointing out in other narrative exercises. There is a joint participation in the eye, the soul and the hand in forming instances of shareable wisdom – Benjamin describes the storyteller as "a man who has counsel for his readers" (86) – which should, crucially, be *useful* to the recipient. The concurrent presence of visual, tactile and sentimental engagement with the narrated content "determine a practice" (108) which, Benjamin argues, has gone somewhat lost in contemporary times: "The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste" (Benjamin 108). References to the body and its composite capabilities coalesce into a definite conception of storytelling as intrinsically tied in with forms of manual labour, thus reifying the act into one of social utility and meaning.

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to

convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (Benjamin 91-2)

Benjamin's alignment of the narrative arts with artisanal labour, simultaneously as metaphor and as literal explanation of material circumstances motivating the evolution of certain conceptual forms, is a form of attention that I will attempt to imitate when analysing my case-studies of choice. Besides, repetition as the fundamental, intrinsic capability that stories possess, the necessary specification that grants their conservation in time and across space – "The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story" (Benjamin 97) – are key notions that seem apt to guarantee a holistic conceptual passage from (original or simple) storytelling to adaptive and iterative narratives. Instances of memory, knowledge, historiography, communality and stratification are key concepts in the narratological analysis I am interested in: Benjamin names them, at different levels in his essay, as components and/or corollary to the storytelling act itself. I was, however, also concerned with the superficial dichotomy between truth and fiction, and in the blurry relationship of mutual influence they create by way of narratives, and through the filter of storytelling. While, on the one hand, I assumed my theoretical argument would be cognizant of the foundational difference that narrative verisimilitude projects on the understanding of facts, ideas, stories that are portrayed as "true" or "truthful", on the other I found myself unable to separate, in each case study, the mythical from the didactic, the factually accurate from the sentimentally effective. The act of creation that, through the explicitly fictional or fanciful, includes or comments on factual and/or historical grounds and creates an effect of verisimilitude, a heightening of authenticity, is the semiotic dynamic I wished to better understand.

At the beginning of my research, I was looking for a framework that could explain the reciprocal merging of fact and invention in fictive discourse(s), in order to describe, but without the anxiety to account for it, what happens when a (textual or visual) fictional object feels more real, more truthful and accurate than a rigorous, "objective" account of

the facts. I feared that language could stand as a barrier, or at best, as a filter, between my individual comprehension and what appeared to me as a set of theoretical approaches to narrativity aspiring to a status of universality, all-embracing application and near-total inclusivity. Through the skepticism that I felt for my own capacity to fully provide a comprehensive literature review, I came to realise how intrinsically limited each of the critical studies I came to read was, and that I could only adopt them as fragments of a bigger effort to enlighten the meaning of a uniquely human invention and act. The prismatic character of the undertaking I had subscribed to gradually became apparent, especially whenever I attempted to pin down the exact meaning of the terms I was reading about, and then reusing epigonally. To clarify the scope of the topics I wished to analyse – in a geographically-conscious dimension in addition to a historically-mindful appraisal – I consulted the interlocking definitions indexed in *The Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014), compiled under the direction of Barbara Cassin, Steven Rendall and Emily Apter. The entry “Fiction” (342) sections the concept four-fold. As a discursive status, fiction relates to actions that make someone “see” to various degrees of accuracy and pertinence, therefore an idea such as “description” matches its apparent oxymoron “deception” inasmuch as they convey/prevent clarity of vision. Genre-related labels such as “history” and “poetry” are linked by theoretical vocabulary describing their operating mechanisms, such as the French word “*récit*”, and the ontological caliber of the world they illustrate, such as German word “*Dichtung*”. The entry further develops the term in “relation to human practice” (342), thus highlighting its real-life consequences and influence, specifically as an “act” or “speech act” in its own right, so much so that a suggested link is to “praxis”, creating a somewhat paradoxical combination of language-based epistemology and pragmatic agency. “Fiction” is, in fact, also understood in relation to truth and the real, which are represented by philosophical keywords that stress the myriad possible gaps, deviations and clashes between what *is* and what *should be*, or is *not*, or *could not be*: “reality” and “truth” go hand in hand, via “fiction”, with “false”, “invention”, “lie”, the German word “*Erscheinung*” as shorthand for “appearance”, and the layered meanings in the Greek word “*doxa*” to indicate the compresence in real life of expectation, intention, imagination and illusion. Finally, the relation to images, art and the faculty of imagination that is embedded in “fiction” is dealt

with via the nonequivalent similarity between “imagination” and “fancy”, in addition to the complex range of independent meanings pertaining to “image” and “mimesis”, thus coming full circle with the tension between imitation, representation, originality and truthfulness in human-specific (speech and pragmatic) acts.

Early on in my research I became acquainted with a series of writings theorising and/or advancing the connection between the notion of “fictionality” and the truthfulness of the content/context it exists in, and develops as a practice. An overview of “Make-believe” theories will be provided in the first section of the chapter, in conjunction with the presentation of another set of contemporary literary theories concerned with the “value” of artistic texts. The preoccupation for the retrieval of a “humanist” scope in literary productions is at the heart of a series of texts which similarly triangulate meaning and textuality with an alleged need for an ethical charge to be clearly stated in literary pages. I need to clarify, however, that my research only partly intended to inquire how stories, or a story, work: its main objective was and became the observation of their mechanisms via the analysis of case studies. Whereas I did engage in the appraisal and description of moral and ethical stances as appearing in the literary and filmic texts I chose to study, I strove not to confuse my interest with moral posturing: the descriptions I crafted reveal indeed much of my own ethical gaze, but do not presume to extend outward theoretical criticism to touch the concrete realm of lived-in life. The effects I still am most curious of pertain to individual end-users’ mindsets: how the story experienced via the reading of a book or the watching of a film infiltrates and sediments in a person’s awareness, and flourishes in their understanding of life and its history. Above all, I craved to grasp how verisimilar information in narrative content could be passed on as believable knowledge and truthful experience, as well as an influence on what is a perceived, or shared popular understanding of what is real in history and with regards to the present. Only a strictly sociological approach could, perhaps, come close to this kind of knowledge, and what is left to literary researchers such as myself is to settle for faux-objective approaches towards the description of what a given text *tells* in a specific *context*, how the oral and verbal can translate their information in visual terms. In order to understand and illustrate a narrative’s structural mode of operation, I believed that a comprehensive comparative analysis should also include issues of

intersemiotic translation into its field of investigation. How a filmic text transposes – utilising its own codes and vocabulary – the instances that are part and parcel of its source literary text which are not exclusively *about* its narrative content, but also, necessarily tied to its expressive modalities and its (genre or medium-specific) formal shapes. It is paramount to overcome the notion of “fidelity” when comparing adaptations and source/adaptation relationships: a clarification of the levels of “pertinence” displayed by all those elements combining to form actual “semio-narrative structures”, not merely in terms of concentration or dilation, but also by way of translation, for instance, of the performance of values, themes, isotopies, programmatic specifics within the source text. My objective is to pursue the, ostensibly straightforward, relationship between cinema and literature via an intersemiotic perspective which could examine the accretion of meaning resulting from a process of appropriation and transcoding. The ambition to identify homogeneous and dishomogeneous elements is a typical of the semiologic approach: starting from a basic assumption in semiotics – to acknowledge the compresence of meaning and signifier – it follows that it is necessary to distinguish which elements pertain, respectively, to the meaning and to the signifier, in order to, eventually, locate the semiotic objects depending from their signifiers.

It emerges that, whenever the aim of narrative semiosis is to compare and contrast non-natural objects and systems, thereby evaluating their analogous operating principles, an analysis of the modalities pertaining to a relationship of *trans-coding* – rooted in the correlation between the *énoncé*, what is enounced, and the act of enunciation itself – is taking place. The application of traditional semiotic frameworks, such as Greimas’ semiotic square, could provide fruitful insight whenever different complex elements are gathered together, and it is necessary to evaluate the rapports of opposition, implication, contradiction, also how they adjust when they translate to a different code. The very same categories formulated by Jakobson in order to describe linguistic functions could also prove useful, in a preliminary phase of analysis, in order to reflect on the elements pertaining to communicative typologies, and stimulate a certain attunement towards the distribution of codes as well as to the articulation within linguistic functions according to modalities that are either similar or different. An example of transferable terminology could include the peculiarity of the enouncing act

as Greimas describes it, “I-here-now”, as compared to the enouncing situation pertaining to a non-oral medium, whose spatial and chronological references necessarily need clarifying via linguistic marks in order to be intelligible. Greimasian notions pertinent to the nature of the *énoncé* appear, therefore, suitable to artistic instances employing either filmic or literary languages, and whence the disjunction between the *énoncé* and the primary instance – the so-called *débrayage* – are as habitual as their conjunction – the so-called *embrayage*. Greimas understands *débrayage* as the split brought on by the subject between the enunciation’s material context and the *énoncé* itself, which is necessarily bound to a spatial and/or temporal context that is *other*, intangible. It is the same mechanism occurring in indirect discourse and in narrative framing. *Embrayage*, on the other hand, describes the opposite process, that is, the reintegration of the enunciation of the spatial and/or temporal components that had been excluded. In narratives, it creates the effect of engagement and contemporaneity. It is therefore important to notice the development of such modalities in the enunciation process as the basis for the meaning and aesthetic components of the artistic text, as well as mechanisms that are able to direct and influence the perception as well as the aesthetic fruition of the work.

Given my primary interest in reflecting on the binary couple substance/expression, it proved useful to retrace the basic principles in Yuri Lotman’s structuralist thought, whose intersemiotic perspective does not exclusively embrace a strictly linguistic realm when considering the differences between form – which is understood as material substance – and expression. A prominent exponent of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, which he founded and directed throughout the 1960’s, Lotman centered his scholarship on the “semiotics of culture”, that is, the analysis of cultural phenomena via a structuralist approach. Lotman understands culture as a space in which various systems of signification coexist in a relationship of mutual correlation and dependence, including the totality of the so-called “non-hereditary information” and the pragmatic modalities that ensure their organization and transmission. Despite his prevalent interest in the working principles of the internal mechanisms and devices that enable the performance of literary texts, Lotman never underestimates the reality-text relationship, especially how culture *appropriates* reality and *semiotises* it. Lotman’s historical and

literary studies – which pre-eminently centered on Russian literature and intellectual history – indicate a consistent research of the constants behind the definition of cultural typologies, which Lotman understands and classifies as antinomy couples.

In the 1975 collection penned with Boris Uspenskij, titled, in its earliest Italian edition, *Tipologia della cultura* (“Typologies of Culture”), Lotman posits a subdivision between “textualised” cultures and “grammaticalised” cultures. Lotman’s cultural taxonomy, therefore, hinges on antipodal organizational systems whose rules build either on the basis of factual precedents or, on the contrary, on the assumption that a fact can only exist whether an already existing regulation describes it (Lotman’s example concerns the fundamental difference between anglosaxon Common Law system and Roman Law). Among the constants which Lotman notoriously takes into account are the authorial intention, public and historical reception of the work under examination, a focus on cultural, social and philosophical “series”, while maintaining a distance from what could have been perceived as a sociological drift. Past eras’ philosophical and ideological frameworks, in addition to esthetic and stylistic tendencies, assume an important role in lotmanian analyses when they take on a systemic, structural and structuring value. Lotman does not see these classifications through the filter of traditional philology, but rather as hierarchical models to be read according to precise descriptive rules pertaining to cultural semiotics. A primary concept for Lotman is that of “modeling system”: a structured set of rules and elements. Lotman indicates natural languages as Primary Modeling System, on top of which Secondary Modeling Systems – structured models that organise meaning – develop in patterns analogous to natural languages’ own schemes. The idea of a linguistic matrix in culture will remain as the foundation of Lotman’s thought even throughout successive evolutions for instance, the notion of a “semiosphere” proposed in the 1980’s – and could be applied to fit the interests of an array of knowledge branches that do not fully, or conventionally, fall under the humanistic definition. It is a peculiar trait of lotmanian texts that they seem able maintain their pertinence and refresh their relevance over time, perhaps because they offer a clear example of a methodological scheme that can be re-applied heuristically: even in front of different sets of objects, by means of structural modelization it is possible to evaluate their conformity or diversity. Considering the rapid

obsolescence and fast turnover that theoretical perspectives, texts and content-driven concepts are subjected to – in addition to the fact that cultural replacement tends to happen at a quicker pace than the language used to describe it does – methodologies including elements of structuralist and semiotic theorizations might help bridge the gap between a purely formalist analysis and a strictly culturalist approach.

I found Lotman's essay "On the Semiotics of the Concepts of 'Shame' and 'Fear'" ("Semiotica dei concetti di 'vergogna' e 'paura'" as translated in *Tipologia della cultura*, 1975) to be a representative example of lotmanian prose: it is a concise essay, structured in separate, numbered points, its development follows a binary logic that alternates reflections over key concepts and counter evidence. By means of literary and historical examples, Lotman proposes radical and well-aimed observation on the subject under examination, thus creating a theoretical space that is not weighed down or compromised by the mandatory requirement of scientific proof in order to be seriously evaluated. Whilst the concepts of "fear" and "shame" are given a definition and analysed in a contrasting comparison, in the space of a few lines Lotman is still able to advance hybrid instances, to reference literary and historical moments whereby reciprocal influence combined with the compresence of fear and shame caused specific behaviours and reactions. Lotmanian speculations seek autonomy and reject any prescriptive intention. Starting from, and by following closely a given specimen (either a historical framework or a literary text), Lotman prevents his hypothesis from turning into cultural or sociological observations, rather, he enables free associations and the creation of new patterns, both methodological and thematic. The lotmanian intention to remove a generalist dimension from the concept of "culture" arguably make his thought particularly cognate with the field of *cultural studies*, which, in turn, embraced semiotics as a viable working methodology. It is worthwhile to notice the contemporaneity between Lotman's studies and the emergence and establishment in the UK, during the 1960's, of "cultural studies" as a school of thought and as a field in its own right. Its output is not simply an aggregate of academic texts or didactic materials, the thinkers animating the field were advancing an explicitly political objective, inspired by the evolving contingencies that were ongoing in postwar British social landscape, which they sought to analyse by means of a long-term historical perspective.

An example, and model, also proved to be Stuart Hall, whose research contains descriptions of intercultural relationships that seemingly imitate the forms of semiotic exchanges. Hall too aligns with the convention that identifies “culture” with a set of “practices”, as a “process” rather than an accumulation of “objects”, and, much like Lotman, Hall also locates in language the capability to create meaning, and interrogates the mechanism allowing natural languages to convey messages and interpretations that are mutually intelligible by speakers. Hall identifies the foundation of his research methodology with semiotics’ own field of interest – the science of signs and their role in the transmission of meaning in culture – and moves on to trace the history of the shift, in academic praxis, from the focus on the way language works towards a more generalized interest for so-called “cultural discourse”, thus actualising an approach more inclined to group together (and consider in its totality) meaning, representation and culture. The evolution is evident in Hall’s adoption of the foucauldian notion of “discursive formations” in later works, such as the edited collection *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) in which Hall summarises ideas such as the “circuit of culture”, by which he reinstates individual and collective direct responsibility in the continuous redefinition of the meaning things possess and come to represent.

It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we *give them a meaning*. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices.
(Hall 3)

Another viable example became Raymond Williams’ body of work: as a literary historian his methodology mixes social sensitivity and critical assessment of texts, thus theorising a way to think about culture in terms that are not merely literary and moral, but also anthropological. In *The Long Revolution*, a 1961 cultural criticism essay, Williams distinguishes three different approaches to the analysis of culture, starting off with a description of the method he finds ideal, in which the theoretical cultural process under examination is disengaged from the material conditions and needs of human life. He

goes on to assess the “documentary” method, which prescribes the evaluation of value and significance exclusively in artistic forms of expression, which Williams posits as antagonistic, and even alien to daily social life. Lastly, he outlines what he terms the “social” method, whereby each cultural production is evaluated as an ineluctable byproduct of social conditions, which it inevitably reflects. Williams believes that, when adopted and applied single handedly, neither of the aforementioned approaches is fully able to efficiently study cultural structures: on the contrary, it is fundamental to acknowledge the complex organization of culture as an organism, and therefore bringing this awareness to one’s research. Williams’ methodological principle is to consider human activities and their interrelations in ways that are devoid of any imposition, necessity or wish to classify them arbitrarily. “The study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life” (63) is William’s theory of culture in a nutshell, whose objective is to find peculiar “structures of feeling”: the intangible ideas that pertain to the culture in a set temporal bracket are treated as communicative efforts brought on socially and filtered historically. Moreover, the analysis further develops the assumption that its focus should be “these people in this place” (Williams 121), or that the fundamental spheres of interest should be politics and economics (what Williams terms “decision” and “maintenance”, 121). Essentially, Williams favours an intellectual approach that centers and grounds humankind in general rather than the necessities of a “congenital system” (132).

In brief: to retrieve and apply a distinctly semiotic praxis – the analysis of meaning and signifier – to the enouncing act would make the analytic appraisal of metadiscursive cultural acts and objects possible, specifically in light of the Lotmanian idea of complex signification arising from the interconnectedness of a multitude of elements. In this sense, theoretical concepts like *debrayage/embrayage* would reinforce more articulate ideas – such as Genettian principles of narratology, or semiotic theorizations of transcoding – which are often applied arbitrarily, without a keen awareness of the particular elements of communicative typologies. A subsidiary intention of the following research is recuperate purely narratological categories, but in full consciousness of their origin, by acknowledging, for instance, that a concept such as “narrator” is artificially construed, and operating on top of a layered tradition of interpretations. It would not be

possible to consider the idea of “narrativity” as a natural result, an act of distancing is necessary in order to reconsider the primigenial questions under scrutiny in Saussurean structuralism, in conformity with the experimentations conducted in the fields of semiotics and cultural studies. Before retracing my reading of semiotic and cultural analysis of narrativity, the first section of the chapter weaves these methodological principles in the description and discussion of a series of other methodological systems, starting its first section by describing the set of so-called “make believe” theories of narrativity in order to gauge the instance of truth in storytelling, and then moving on to an assessment of recent critical output regarding the case for the humanist value of literature and its connection with the issues of fiction and truth.

1.1. Stories: Inventing the Truth

1.1.1. Imagining (On Make-Believe Theory)

Making sense, creating meaning by ordering objects and facts in a structure of narrative cohesion is an action that may feel natural, either in its oral, textual or visual variations: it is a practice that is often perceived as ancient as social communities, and popularly understood as a naturalised tendency, one that is, nonetheless, complex and artificial. The convergence of the fictitious and the truthful in narrative acts is at the centre of a series of theoretical stances that adopted the term “make-believe” as their umbrella term, and as their ultimate research subject storytelling as practice. The notion of “make-believe” is most prominent in the critical work by philosophers Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1993) and Gregor Currie’s *The Nature of Fiction* (1990). Fictionality is hereby explained in analogy with children’s games of make-believe, putting the notion of “imagination” in a key position. As Alexander J. Bareis and Lene Nordrum summarise in the opening of *How to Make Believe: The Fictional Truths of the Representational Arts* (2015), in the process of a make-believe game, “participants will generate fictional truths according to the unwritten, but mutually accepted rules of the game” (1). Overall, the theory posits that so-called “works of art” are used as “props” in games of make-believe (i.e. stories and narratives), therefore propelling “mechanics of generation” of “fictional truths”: a

pattern that allegedly recurs substantially unchanged across the range of the representational arts. Make-believe theory, therefore, can successfully function as an explanatory force for other fields of inquiry, especially literature and film (which are still included in the bigger realm of “representational arts”). One particularly evident drawback of the make-believe approach is its posturing as yet another grand theory hovering *above* many different fields, claiming to provide an ostensibly “one-size-fits-all” explanation to the mechanism at work in single works and/or specific media. There is a crucial distinction, however, between “make-believe” as an intention and effect and narrative: critics do equate the two, moreover, they describe make-believe as depending from narrative structures: it is central to most forms of representational art, but the drawing of similarities goes beyond the recognition of narratological principles. In brief, the response that academics like Bareis and Nordrum offer with regards to the scope of the make-believe approach is that academic enquiry into aesthetics needs not be divided between theory and interpretation. Therefore, “big picture and single instance”, “top-down and bottom-up approaches” can cohabit (2). Instead, the realm that this theory can successfully highlight and question is that of prescriptive imaginings: how does the text command the imaginings it wants to convey? What logic and conventions does the next need comply to in order to guarantee intelligibility?

In *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1993), Walton’s notion of make-believe is advanced as the organising principle in the representational arts: consequently, the understanding of a work of art goes through a mediated fruition, a contextual reading that is informed by long established social institutions. How does this, however, relate to individual and communal imagination? And, most importantly, *whose* imagination is taken into consideration and given outward space when “make-believe” develops into factual action? Walton claims that it is not solely the viewer’s or reader’s imagination that becomes engaged in, or is unleashed through the fruition of narratives. Rather, it is by way of a normatively-structured process of make-believe that the single work of narrative fiction is able to supply a direction on how to appreciate what is to be imagined, how to interact correctly with the work in order to experience the imaginings it bears. Hence, an analogy is traced between the imaginative response in the experience of the work of art and the search for truth in the

process of acquisition of knowledge (Walton 41). In this framework, the work of art is not the purveyor of inspirational material for independent flights of imagination, rather, it is a formalised creation that must comply to certain standards in order to allow “the imaginer” to respond to it correctly. Indeed, there are rules one needs to follow in order to play the game. “Prescriptive” or “directed imagining”, however, does not hinder free associations and independent train of thoughts for viewers/readers. While it does not negate such possibilities, it nevertheless implies the existence of “appropriate imaginings”: logical assumptions and outcomes that are inferable from, or made explicit in the text. Appropriate imaginings work in accordance to, and as a result of, theoretical principles and stylistic conventions (such as a linear narrative structure, but also an “experimental” storyline) which work as guidelines for both creators and viewers/readers. In his essay “Destabilizing Reality. Postmodern Narrative and the Logic of Make-Believe” (in Bareis 2015) Ira Newman makes a good point with regards to the idea of “imagining” as a regulated process: the prescription at play within the texts does not necessarily need to result in a “visualisation”. Of course, Newman admits, visual invention can at times occur, but generally “imagine seeing” has no consequential correlations with visual objects or physical sight, although the analogy between visualising/imagining “appear[s] so deeply embedded in our epistemological frameworks” (147). It is not through mere “visualisation”, Newman argues, that Walton’s “prescriptive imaginings” take place, since these independent, cognitive actions are only headways for the correct interpretations, they are projections that guide towards the proper reading of the piece (148).

Walton also reflects on how to properly define the appropriateness of such instances: “true”, for instance, would be misleading since it is not “reality” that is under scrutiny. “False” would equally be irrelevant as no factual link with the real world is usually claimed in fictitious works (Walton 60). Walton proposes “fictional” as a suitable working term in order to think of the truthfulness of a story (or any other work of art) as pertaining to and bearing validity within that propositional context only. Expressing comments such as “it is not fictional”, on the other hand, would point to factual errors in the interpretations or reading of clues embedded in the text, therefore rejecting their relevance to the story, but not in absolute terms (Walton 60). The concern with mimesis

that Walton explores in his book leads him to theorise it as prescriptive rather than a modelling force, insofar as the “prescriptive” aspect pertains to the standards and conventions that the work adheres to, and do not restrict the imagining potentiality that each end-user can apply. Such framework tolerates paradoxes and contradictions (e.g. on the level of logical storyline, or verisimilitude with the real world) and welcomes alternate forms of meanings that do not rely on, or derive from strictly logical chains of thought.¹ Walton’s concept of “prescriptive imagining”, therefore, seems to require readers (or users) to take on greater responsibilities when faced with difficult, non-linear texts as the “guiding” principles embedded in the text are not non-existing, or misplaced, but resisting to conventional, superficial decoding habits.

The deceptively univocal relationship between historical reality and narrative subject matter is at the center of Stein Haugom Olsen’s essay “The Concept of Literary Realism” (in Bareis 2015), whence the notion of “realist literature” has relevance only in literary analysis concerned with situating styles and defining forms. Olsen argues (echoing Ian Watt’s 1957 *The Rise of the Novel*) that this process is indistinguishable from other literary approaches when it comes to assess its relationship to “reality” and “verisimilitude”: it remains a recognisable convention (15). A convention, however, that enjoys notable privilege in comparison to other literary styles, since its link and debt to the “real world” can be identified more easily, and might therefore result better digestible to (untrained) audiences (15-16). The binary at stake, however, pertains to the notions of representation and truthfulness, which the realist author (or critic) tends to conflate: the independent areas of “real-life meaning” and “literary meaning”, Olsen argues, are made to stand alongside one another, one “standing for” the other (17). The idea of literary realism as the the style allowing for a “truthful/objective representation of reality” (Olsen 17), or at least and “approximation” is particularly dear to certain critics (Olsen specifically indicates Lukács and Levin) and is, he seems to imply, grounded in their

¹ These claims are mostly expressed in conjunction with specific case-studies throughout the theoretical essays I have quoted so far. For instance, in his essay “Destabilizing Reality. Postmodern Narrative and the Logic of Make-Believe”, Newman makes his case via a reading of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s experimental novel *La Jalousie*, showing that the inconsistencies on the level of subject matter and narrative flux in the novel enrich the reading experience rather than undermining it (153).

very affinity and appreciation for texts aligning to the realist tradition. Conversely, that is also the main motive justifying their choice: it is a tradition that seeks to render “the real” – in an ontological and epistemological sense – on the page. Therefore, a fundamental problem with realism emerges out of an ideological standpoint: realism can be a naturalising force when the “real” on the page is portrayed – and passed on – as the “authentic” version of the reality experienced in its analogous historical time and place. The immediate consequences of this would be a justification of a certain order of things, a preservation of certain sets of ideas regarding the past that could be stabilised as faithful referents, hence creating a specific lexicon that would allow identification and categorisation of said “past” as a historical factuality, given the “realist” label such style displays. Olsen, however, appears fairly dismissive of both post-structuralist corrective notions of “classic realism” and postmodern critical discourse. He reads the former as an attempt to indicate a certain school of writing that seeks to create the illusory effect of reality, without granting its fusion with reality (19). Postmodern critical thinkers, on the other hand, are criticised for their presumption to do “real” realism “in a non-realist” way, that is, by pointing out how the work refrains from “impos[ing] a false unity and order on experience and it has no final meaning” (Olsen 19). It does not amount to, Olsen argues, a feasible form of truth-telling, nor should it be branded as such. If major critical currents are to address the problem of the “unrealness” of realism by using its traditional name only as a working definition, Olsen argues, then the term itself could acquire currency (and meaning) only as an ideological tool, possibly not even as a relic of literary criticism (21).

A concept of realism which licences the conclusion that modernism leads to the destruction of literature, that only naïve readers can find any satisfaction in realist literary works, or that realist novels are not really realist, or that, contrary to all empirical evidence, realism is dead, is simply useless as a critical tool. (Olsen 27)

Olsen’s suggestions, however, appear to take the plunge from the same viewpoint: the need to reject realism as an “objective/truthful representation of reality” and to adopt “a radically conventionalist view of realism” (28). In this view, “realism” would only work as

a *portmanteau* for a “set of techniques, conventions, subjects etc.” bearing no reference whatsoever to social or physical reality *despite* its name (28). While Olsen concedes that such an approach would undercut the sheer pleasure readers describe when engaging in a work that bridges life and art (28), he argues that it would enrich and sharpen the notion of literature as being an accurate instrument for describing and imitating in a “life-like manner” (29). An imitation or depiction, however, that is under no obligation of respecting “verisimilitude” with the supposed real world (32), or repeat patterns of “probability” as endorsed by mundane logic: truth-claims, in Olsen’s view, should rather be substituted with more flexible notions of “approximation” (33).

With regards to the shifting proximity between what feels real and what is told as real, Alexander J. Bareis attempts, in his essay “Fictional Truth, Principles of Generation and Interpretation” (in Bareis 2015) to indicate the principles that allow “fictional truths” to be generated within the context of the representational arts, and how such meanings are implicated, if not subordinated, to a process of interpretation of the work, which greatly depends on a joint effort, both on the side of the creator and of the viewer/reader. Systems of truth embedded in works of art exist as such only if the “game of make-believe” is in place, that is, if the parties engaged in its fruition know and chose to follow the “rules” that are able to successfully decode the work, and implicitly agree to perceive and understand its content as “true” in its (fictional) context. “A fictional truth, therefore, has to be true in relation to a fictional world” (167), states Bareis. The “mechanics of generation”, however, depend on specific facets which the very texts supply in order to become readable (as well as sites of functional make-believe game): these are guidelines such as plots, characterisation, descriptions, etcetera. These “mechanics”, however, should not be considered as highly stable or unambiguous, since they are primarily subject to issues of genre and structural cohesion, and are, of course, dependent on individual readers’ familiarity (as well as a positive disposition) with certain technical specifics or genre conventions. What Bareis calls a “principle of genre and/or media convention” (172) can participate and facilitate the creation of fictional truths through the intelligibility of certain technical aspects, resources and solutions that are part of a media-specific legacy, and are therefore understood as meaningful processes. Propositions that participate in the making of fictional truths, however, need

not – and most often do not – appear as explicit stances in the artwork, since the very structure and set of conventional “rules” guiding readers and authors allow for “implied realities” to exist and be noticed (Bareis 167-8). While part of such information has to be inferred or taken up indirectly, other information – following the “*principle of fiction*” – exists “for a reason”, because it conveys specific details that are crucial to the internal economy of the work (Bareis 170). While these features are fundamental on the side of the artwork, readers/viewers need operate along given premises in order to participate successfully to the game of make believe: for instance, they consent to suspend one’s belief, they do not ask “silly questions” as Walton himself posits in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (175), and agree to face the work with a specific “charitable” mindset, an awareness of the specific truth-conditions of the artwork and its paradoxical, contradictory nature (Bareis 171). The “mechanics of interpretation and generation” theorised by Walton, therefore, appear to include all information and meaning – even what is unintentional, private, non-informed – as props in games of game-believe, Bareis suggests (180). These processes need not be intentional, cognisant, informed assessment of the fictional texts. They constitute, rather, the literal “grasping” of the meaning entailed therein, and ensure the connection between utterance and implication. The generation of fictional truths, therefore, is but the starting point to a chain of reactions (partly personal, partly methodological, and generally having to do with an awareness of the context and the history of the work) which, nevertheless, are not fundamental in allowing the work to function, as is, for those who are able to activate its inner workings.

Vera Nünning focuses on the availability, willingness and capability to follow the aforementioned rules and conventions which readers/viewers need and want to show in order to enjoy fictional narratives. In her essay *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2015), Nünning theorises “trust”, in general, as an individual’s decision to believe in the reliability of another person, thus accepting to run a (personal) risk that cannot be fully verified via knowledge, but still forms the basis and core of human communication and interaction. However, manipulation and deception, Nünning admits, are deeply ingrained in human communicative models: her enquiry, therefore, seeks to understand how this conflicting

duality translates to fictional forms of narrative, and whether unreliable narrators in fictional narratives are the same, or are at least analogous, to real-life unreliable “narrators”. According to Wayne Booth’s definition of unreliability in narratives (Nünning mentions in passing his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*), a narrator is reliable when they speak in accordance to or adherence with the implied author’s norms and voice, and they become unreliable when they do not, but still the device (i.e. their partiality) is clearly visible to the reader, who is aware – in accordance with the implied author – that the narrator is not to be trusted (which, in turn, adds to the pleasure and fun of the reading experience). Whether Booth’s is accepted as the universal, absolute definition of unreliable narrator, it also implicates the need to problematise the idea of *one* single form of unreliability. Other forms of unreliability that have been tentatively proposed, Nünning recalls, generally read as explicit or covert hetero-diegetic narrative personae. Moreover, frictions caused by the (inevitable) discrepancies between the alignment of implied author’s values and reader’s values should also be taken into account. “Narrative is a way of attributing meaning to occurrences, a process governed, among other things, by selection, perspectivisation, moral positioning, and genre conventions” writes Nünning in her introduction to *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness* (6). How to identify an unreliable narrator? The clues, Nünning suggests, can be “text-internal, text-external and paratextual” (10). There might be inconsistencies on the level of plot, of discourse, even some stylistic devices can be particularly revelatory, especially rhetorically conspicuous gestures and genre conventions. Besides, some unambiguous interpretations spoken in the narrator’s voice might sound as straightforwardly inaccurate, inconsistent or wrong to certain readers. An important facet to be taken into account is the moral gap that might widen or close depending on each reader’s own ethical compass with regards to the storyline.² On a related note on methodology (11),

² The wide range of individual and cultural personalisation occurring in communicative acts, and which narratives echo, as described so far, also appear to be in agreement with Paul Grice’s “principle of cooperation” as a guiding framework. The four Gricean maxims – proposed in his essay *Logic and Conversation* (collected in *Studies in the Way of Words*, 1989) – describe the components whose ideal compresence guarantees a successful conversation: “quantity” defines the right amount of information; “quality” concerns the accuracy of the information conveyed; “relation” prescribes attention to content and contextual pertinence; “manner” suggests conciseness and clarity as desirable characteristics in

Nünning asks: why do narrators tell untrustworthy stories? Are they purposefully trying to deceive others? Are they trying to tell the truth, but they are unable to do so, because they are incompetent or naive? In addition, I would also ask: why should a delusive, incomplete, biased story told subjectively not count as *a form* of truth? Why should the public necessarily and exclusively accept (and support) the dichotomous binary liar/fool, as Nünning suggests? In Nünning's framework, in fact, truth is an aim, an object, a function whose validity exists only when others believe in their accuracy and veracity: "[...] from the narrator's point of view, the most important function is to convince others of the truth of their stories" (Nünning 13). Communication, therefore, can only happen on the exclusive condition that the narrator is believed to have a trustworthy voice (13). Gaps between implied author's moral alignment and narrator's spoken version of reality gain, over time, a specific value as historical evidences of the shifting boundaries of what is considered "borderline", or "transgressive" in a given time: what used to be deviant, may have become the norm or, conversely, forms of shared knowledge embedded so deeply as to exist as cultural implicit may have gone lost (Nünning 14). "Framing acts"³ – as theorised in the anthropological works by Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman, specifically in the latter's sociological transposition of the concept in *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974) – are understood by Nünning as readers' interpretative strategies: framing effects pertain to the construction of the overall intention of the work, for instance, the decision to read a text

conversations. The intrinsic cultural foundation of the maxims make them particularly relevant to contemporary Western patterns and etiquette of communication, and arguably recur and overlap in narratives developed via non-conversational media: failing to conform to the maxims can also, perhaps, account for stylistic variants and shifting reliability in the kinds of narrative artefacts so far indicated.

³ "Frames" are the conceptual basis in framing theory, and indicate the meaningful ways employed by individuals and collectivities to understand and organize experience. In anthropology and sociology, the study of these elements can provide an analysis of specific sets of recurring and sanctioned social behaviours ("strips" in Goffman's work); in media studies, "frames" indicate the supporting information that ensures and influences people's comprehension of the work they are consuming: just like social frames help organise experience, media frames help give meaning to the messages in communications. My later discussion of Gregory Currie's take on narrativity as a communicative act will also engage with his usage of the terms "frame" and "framing", which differs slightly from Goffman's and Bateson's.

as meta-fictional or autobiographical, to read it in terms of psychology or morality instead of aesthetics, or to create an image of the author's ethos (16-7).

The active positioning of readers (and, by extension, viewers) is tackled in another essay included in the collection Nünning edited: Matthias Brütsch's "Irony, Retroactivity, and Ambiguity: Three Kinds of 'Unreliable Narration' in Literature and Film" looks at the reader's privileged position with regards to narrative: the opportunity to compare the narrative's diegetic reality and the way it differs from the narrator's account of the same is only available to the public (221). However, an intrinsic difference between the reading and the watching public soon arises: while readers participate in the narrative process – for instance by making alliances with the implied author's views, or by maintaining a distance from the narrator's instances – film viewers's compresence with an unreliable narrator usually comes out for them as a revelation at the end of the film, usually in the form of a plot twist unveiling a chain of deceiving or wrongful evidences offered to viewers throughout their viewing experience. There is, however, a broad range of traceable intentions animating the choice of an "unreliable" narrative stream, as well as specific visible effects in the scope and in the crafting of the work. Brütsch lists deception, distance between narrative instances, discrepancy, irony, dramaturgy (similarly to anagnorisis, a discrepancy that remains unrevealed until the very end), surprise (whence the whole narrative is oriented towards the concluding plot twist), issues of focalisation/subjectivity in the narrative point-of-view (223-4).

Unreliability is a relational phenomenon. That a narrator's account cannot be trusted is not enough to make him unreliable. What are needed additionally are signs of his belief in his version of the story without which there is no (ironic) distance and thus no unreliability (in the sense of the literary prototype). (Brütsch 235)

It is hardly surprising that the realms of real life and narrativity tend to coalesce in discussions of "unreliability", especially when its corollary instances are transcended into theory: the burden of human sensitivity and ethical depth that ideas such as "deception" or "untrustworthy" bring along is a considerable emotional charge to be considered. In fact, Uri Margolin, in his essay "Theorising Narrative (Un)reliability: A

Tentative Roadmap” (collected in Nünning’s 2015 edited collection) defines “unreliable”, in general terms, as an “evaluative predicative” which can be applied to a diversity of things and actions in everyday life, not just discursive/verbal objects. “Reliability is crucial whenever assessments, predictions, projections and future scenarios are involved”, states Margolin (31). To further clarify his usage of the terms, Margolin provides a list of definitions. First, the “Narrated” indicates a set of (semantic) propositions concerning a given domain which the involved parties are free to accept as credible, or at least plausible. Then, “Narration” is understood as the pragmatic process/activity whereby claims about a set moral domain of reference are transmitted: Margolin sees narrations as communicative performances, which can be successful when they comply with “communicative norms” such as “accuracy, sincerity, quality and manner”, or unsuccessful (i.e. unreliable) when they do not strive to communicate a “sincere” account, but rather resort to falsehood, evasion, omission, equivocation and irrelevance. Lastly, a “Narrator” resides in a mental dimension as the “inner-textual” or “actual” originator of the narration itself: in order to produce functioning narratives, a narrator must possess cognitive and behavioural properties, whose results (as well as the criteria themselves) can be assessed on the basis of cultural codes. Margolin, however, does not merely describe the epistemological state of narratives and narrators through the filter of “reliability”, he casts the whole model in motion by means of the notion of reliability itself. “Reliability is actually a gradient” (31) he adds, meaning that, as a feature of discourse, it entails and is projected towards future states and actions. Something that is deemed unreliable, therefore, is something that is considered – possibly according to the same cultural criteria he earlier ascribed to narrators and listeners alike – likely to go wrong, or against expectations, or to have a frustrating outcome. The unreliable element in narratives has virtually no impact on the “present” state of things, and its underpinnings – whether it truly is unreliable – will be revealed later on in the very narrative (Margolin 33). A reliable narrative, conversely, is customarily intended as a feat of successful communication, as well as a dependable expression of credible information and plausible interpretation (Margolin 37). Hence, the processes whereby a narrator’s reliability is assessed seldom have anything (or very little) to do with the facts narrated. On the contrary, they appear to involve single

readers' own, original, possibly biased judgement of the consistency of the narrator. Trust, sincerity and accuracy, therefore, are the basic principles Margolin uses to theorise the narratorial device in fictional works: aesthetic and historical criteria are secondary and depend on the idea of confidence and alignment.

Margolin's employment of moral and communicative categories such as "trustworthiness" arguably lead back to Gregory Currie's appraisal of narratives as products of agency in *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (2010), where he describes them as representational artefacts, allowing individuals to tell each other "things" – pass on information and stories – by crafting representations of people, objects, actions and occurrences. "[I]ntentional-communicative artefacts" (25), according to Currie's definition, include stories and information that are meant to provide and improve communicative processes, and are therefore endowed with an "artefactual function" (Currie 6), that is, they are fashioned in accordance with principles of intelligibility that guarantee the successful transference of the maker's intentions, and thus ensure that the story told is intelligible and understood. Fictional narratives work as corpora: they contain and project a truth that only adapts and pertains to the corpus itself. What is true within the corpus/text is a representation that functions and is accepted as truth within the corpus, but is not necessarily deemed equally truthful when it overlaps with, or is borrowed from other textual corpora, or even from non-representational systems (Currie 8). "Narrative's content is often, when applied to fiction, described as 'what is true in the story'" (Currie 12): inconsistencies, errors, incoherences, falsities in narratives, therefore, are tolerated or rejected (and admit a range of stances in between the two) according to the "authorial intention" that readers ascribe to, or perceive as embedded in the work. A fictional novel, for instance, customarily tolerates inconsistencies to a greater extent than a non-fiction history essay. Currie indicates what he names "pragmatic inference" (14-5) – information deduced from explicit affirmations – as the building blocks responsible for the transmission of significance to the general formation of the whole narrative's trueness and to its narrative content. In addition, Currie situates in the inference into the maker's (or utterer's) intentions the leap ensuring the passage from the understanding of single sentences to the understanding of entire narratives (16). What is unclear in Currie's

theoretical understanding, however, is how instrumental the understanding of the maker's intention is to the comprehensive fruition of the work under examination, and how that insight influences its understanding and, potentially, its successful appreciation. Whether the accomplishment of the reading is an outcome partly or fully connected with the notion of authorial voice and authorship; whether the primigenial stance that spurred on the creator should play a crucial part in the appraisal of their work, it is left undetermined. Currie does not appear to believe that narratives can happen in a vacuum, nor does he attempt to endorse theories addressing them as seemingly objective, independent creations. Instead, he tries to adjust the focus on a presumed tautological instance: narratives are treated as communicative tools employed and exchanges between speaking individuals. In this perspective, Currie's apparently carefree attitude towards the taxonomies of "narrators", "implied narrators" and "authors", seems reasonably contextualised within his heuristic, pragmatic approach, whereby narratives are treated as complex communicative processes whose major aim and effort is to achieve the maximum level of mutual comprehensibility – by using pragmatic inference on the listener's side and by acting according to mutually-intelligible conventions on the speaker's side. Currie seems under no illusion that communicative exchanges can match expectations with their outcomes, since pragmatic inference aims "to produce an on-average good but not perfect match between speaker's intentions and hearer's uptake" (25). "Achieved meaning is what an attentive hearer, using pragmatic inference, can reasonably be expected to understand on the basis of what is heard", Currie specifies (25-6). The meaning achieved, in the end, cannot but linger halfway between what one interlocutor wanted to express and what their peer was able to grasp and compose into something meaningful.

Currie seems cognizant of this stumbling block when he writes "Narrative-making may proceed by accretion rather than by joint action [...]" (65): perhaps the need for repetition and restatement, on top of mutual dedication to the exchange, makes up much more of the communicative acts filtered into artful narratives than we would like to admit. It is also a pattern that might prove useful to elucidate the operating principles behind film-making as well as novel-making. It is commonly accepted that authorship in cinema should encompass the range of professional makers participating in the making

of the film often in ways that merge, and cannot be untangled once the work is completed and offered for public viewing. To some extent, this case also pertains to the process behind the making of a work of writerly nature: while it is customary, and somewhat easier, to identify in the author the major authority conferring meaning and direction the written work, the paratextual activity executed in the context of commercial publishing should also be taken into account: from editing, to commissioning, to cover-design to marketing strategies and crafting of press-releases and social media publicity content. On this specific point, Currie's statement is blunt: "There is no distinction that should or can be made between authors and narrators, for there is no distinction to be made between narrative-making and narrative-telling" (65). Currie's concern with regards to what counts in theoretical analysis of narrative works, however, seemingly aligns with the classic Genettian notion of "implied author". Currie, much like Gérard Genette's narratology, discusses "embedding" as the feature of "stories within stories", whereby the narrator/author dyad is fairly easy to identify out of a context-based overview; he includes "extension" as the fictional creation of authorial personae whose assertions or stances are in conflict with the main plot line and its interpretations. Yet, as authorial choices that exist as conventions – which contribute to the general meaning of the work, and are generally not in disaccord with Currie's general equation between author and narrator – Currie tends to set them aside from his main line of inquiry. The questions worth asking, Currie notes, deal with the ways a narrator *knows* about their subject matter, whether they are reliable, what their point of view is:

The author of the letter, novel or poem is its narrator in the proper sense: the person whose intentions have to be understood if we are to understand what is being communicated to us. (66)

Currie, however, does not reject the counterintuitive notion that separates the content of the book from the person whose name is printed on the cover: the incorporation he exerts aims to facilitate the theoretical discussion around such technicalities. Authors and narrators can be internal to the fictional realm of the narrative: intradiegetic voices

provide the foundational source of narrative communication and content within the limits of the fictional work. This is also true of unreliable narrators, since the fallacious stories they provide are the source of specific reflections and concerns. There are simultaneously, as Currie advocates, fictional authors in the story and flesh-and-blood authors writing the story (67), a stance that is possibly in keeping with the “true in the fictional realm” principle of make-believe theory.

Currie’s discussion of narratives does not only take into account the “who” and “what” implied in narratives, i.e. the individuals engaging in a communicative act, and the narrative content made mutually accessible via the telling act. Some nuanced components responding to “how” a narrative comes to be understood – including as either reliable or untrustworthy – are also given space, for instance, in the acknowledgement of the emotional and ideological toolkit each narrative engages with, or the assessment of aesthetic and moral effects elicited by a skilled layering, doubling and multiplying of authorial interventions. Currie uses the term “framework” to indicate the “preferred set of cognitive, evaluative, and emotional responses to the story” (86), that is, the details and values that foster the appropriate response for a better engagement with the work. Frameworks can be explicit, and therefore can influence directly (and perhaps, unquestioningly) readers’ responses to the story. A framework can also be a device in and of itself, Currie argues, especially when it operates tacitly, as is the case when specific narrative skills are employed deftly to present their content in an unusual or challenging way, thus signalling to the reader that fruition is not guaranteed to be a pleasurable experience. Point of view also plays a role in orienting the framing: a narrator’s chosen focus will not necessarily be accessible in open terms, but rather through the emotional and evaluative filters exemplified by the actions and thoughts portrayed in the narrative. Point of view encloses behaviours, mood, attitudes, states of mind pertaining to a character, and each minute detail can be expressive of point of view: an oblique, scant vision of the situation at the heart of the narrative influences said subject matter, and that is made possible, Currie contends, as the product of a specific point of view. Currie goes on to suggest that such instances are usually best understood by way of a “joint attending” – i.e. a reader’s empathetic elongation towards the emotional predicaments happening in the narrative – and a

“guided attending” – a narratorial attentive tuning towards the fostering of a shareable mood (97-100).

Frames can, indeed, complicate the reception of the work, but they are largely responsible for the “morally enlarging” (Currie 87) capabilities that narrative works often provide. Framing casts ethical ideas and emotions over the story, it shapes, or at least suggests, readers’ response to the events of the plot and to the stance displayed by the narrator: “If we take a narrator to be unreliable, we will have to radically rethink our assumptions about what happens in the story”, Currie specifies (93). A subversive framing, for instance, might help readers understand difficult ideas or situations, but could also result in absolute rejection on the side of the reader: Currie sees “resistance to framing” (87) as a crucial component of the communicative process pertaining to narratives. Framing that endorses ideologies that are no longer accepted as valid, or that the individual reader rejects, or finds unconvincing, can all generate a range of emotional responses, even very strong reactions. Reading a blatantly racist novel, for instance, might prove to be an awkward, distressing or anger-inducing experience for its reader, so much so that they might decide to interrupt it, and refuse to comply with its worldview. It might also, however, create a safe zone allowing for a virtual exploration of unpleasant or obsolete ideas.

Such mental battlings require, in fact, high level tolerance to incoherence – a willingness to admit conflicting ideological identities within oneself, even if for only a limited time – and a certain amount of flexibility when assessing the validity and veracity of ideas and beliefs therein described (116). A rigid refusal to allow free flow to extraneous ideas, Currie suggests, may at times be a choice motivated by the nature of the framing: the expenditure of emotional resources necessary to come to terms with the way a story is presented might overcome the function of the story itself.⁴ That there might be

⁴ Overall, Currie’s philosophically-oriented descriptions of narrative mechanisms at work appear grounded in empirical notation and, ostensibly, anecdotal evidence he likely gathered in years of book-reading and film-watching. Even when drawing on the work of psychologists, anthropologists and neuroscientists – especially when discussing notions such as “imitation” (101-3) – the brain pathways activating when a page of fiction is read seem of little interest to Currie, whose discussion of “mind” hinges on verbal images such as “adjusting one’s state of mind to harmonize it with that of another” (101), and have little interest, or even capability, to chart cognitive and neurochemical steps. Currie’s theorising gestures are

overlapping between emotional reactions to fictional situations and analogous emotional states responding to real situations that are similar to the fictional ones, is, in fact, a scenario that Currie admits and fears (111). Nevertheless, Currie argues neatly for the veridicality of such emotions:

Note that how we feel about fictional things and events is how we *really* feel about them; fictions put us into distinctive and highly salient emotional states such as warm-hearted approval, anger and loathing.⁵ (111)

It is interesting to compare Currie's acknowledgement of individual emotional reactions to narrative frameworks with Kathleen Stock's take on the same concept, which she partly resists: in her 2017 book *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination*, she devotes a whole chapter to what she names "imaginative resistance", and returns to discuss the point of the necessary awareness and fundamental distancing during the fruition of a fictional narrative at various reprises.

more akin to etching or hand-drawing, rather than to x-ray photography or brain scanning: they graze the surface, and illustrate a method, an intellectual heritage even, but eventually fails to construe a properly theoretical toolbox, or, at least, a system that could fully help deepen one's appreciation of narrative capabilities, Currie's, however, are pinpoints that might prove useful in organising and directing properly "scientific" investigation of the physiological and cognitive phenomena occurring in human brains and bodies involved in telling and being told stories.

⁵ Kendall Walton makes a similar point in his 1978 paper "Fearing Fictions", in which, however, he seemingly tones down the physical impact of the negative narrative-induced affects Currie describes, by inventing the term "quasi-fear feelings" to indicate the set of emotions evoked specifically by the interaction with fictional narrative realms. Walton expressly collides against the supposedly accepted notion that audiences' attitudes towards should involve "suspension of disbelief" or "decrease of distance", and employs "make-believe" as the epistemological factor allowing the simultaneous positive fruition of fictions and their experience as personally affecting the individual on an emotional level. "Rather than somehow fooling ourselves into thinking fictions are real, we become fictional" states Walton (23), thereby suggesting that the degree of intimate knowledge acquired via fictitious narratives can be attained "make-believedly", in the form of an extension of individual awareness and first-hand participation, including by means of positive and/or distressing feelings. Briefly, Walton argues for proximity and complicity rather than strategic distancing and posturing in order to obtain the best understanding possible of the fictional work.

Focusing on the fact that authors write fictions with a range of intentions, that these intentions have consequences for fictional content, and that competent readers discern these intentions via a grasp of pragmatic context, lends itself to observing that sometimes, authors intend readers to engage in “counterfactual” imagining: imagining intended to lead or to be accompanied by the acquisition of certain counterfactual beliefs. Imaginative resistance, I argued, occurs where there reader discerns that she is being asked to engage in counterfactual imagining, and specifically, to acquire or reflect upon a belief which in fact she cannot share. (Stock 209)

Only Imagine is a book-long defense of “extreme intentionalism”, a theory that draws on the set-principles of make-believe theory (such as the concepts of “fictional truth” and “fictional false” whose veracity is understood as fully valid within the boundaries of the fictional work) in order to argue for the total control on the author’s side with regards to what readers imagine as they approach and when they experience a text.

In her introduction, Stock argues that “[...] the fictional content of a particular text is equivalent to exactly what the author of the text *intended the reader to imagine*”, but throughout her argumentation it becomes apparent how Stock’s theory does not intend to negate the reader’s autonomous shaping of the reading matter. Instead, her main philosophical interest is grounded in understanding “what is fictionally true” (3) and, incidentally, Stock provides various examples of welcomed “non-cognitive gains that elude any authorial planning – for instance, a book might remind a reader of a past moment, or help another reader in difficult times – and, crucially, her framework does not endorse criticism that psychologises the author or seeks biographical readings of their work (79).⁶ Extreme intentionalism, Stock forestalls, is ill-suited to comprehend artistic meaning: interpretations and personal takes belong to a realm that cannot be

⁶ Stock’s refusal to engage in biographical criticism evokes Gregory Currie’s casual remark about the narrativization of human lives. “What, finally, of lives as narratives? On my account, no life is a narrative since no life is a representational artefact” he writes in *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (24): the clash between authorial act and human embodiment seemingly poses an unprecedented theoretical and ethical problem to theories of narrativity as primarily concerned with the fictitious and the realistic.

curbed in an aprioristic discourse – readers’ and critics’ responses are bound to, and need to be, varied and personal. The authorial “intention” that governs the entire work is, therefore, only concerned with establishing what is real, and what is not, within a single text.

The notions of “real”, “fictional” and “reliable”, that are key in the critical discussions I have overviewed so far, bespeak a preoccupation with the quality and the aspect of the narratives circulating in the culture and among communities. They all seemingly fail, however, to address the question of “usefulness”, or rather, the “purpose” placed halfway between the “how” and “why” embedded in the narrative act. A trend of contemporary Anglo-American academic criticism has attempted to retrieve the so-called “humanist” value of literature and to connect it with a supposedly “cognitive gain”. The humanist scope of literary traditions, both textual and critical, functions simultaneously as an exemplary ambition as well as a definitional label. The idea that reading literature serves a material, yet unmeasurable purpose – to help individuals and communities think and learn about themselves, their social organisation, the values they avow, share and transmit – is also a critical asset whose force backlashes against all the subjects involved in the act of reading. Which texts become literary works worth reading, what meanings and feelings are cast upon them (therefore creating expectations and reputations), whose opinions about those very texts are worth listening to are all aspects equally connected, and consequential, to the idea of “literary humanism”.

1.1.2. Value (On Literary Humanism)

The concluding part of this chapter section will offer an overview of relatively recent philosophical approaches to the criticism of literature, more specifically, to a branch of philosophical assessment of literature that is firmly grounded in the analytical mode of philosophy. Bernard Harrison’s case for a reappraisal of the fundamentally “humanistic” value and character of literature is presented in *What Is Fiction For?* (2015), and Richard Gaskin argues in *Language, Truth and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (2013) for literature’s cognitive capability as grounded in its referential quality. These analyses seem concerned with gauging to what extent the world

described and enshrined within a work of literary fiction can claim any relationship with factual, mundane reality. Whether the invented worlds of literature are indebted to or dependent on the real, inherited world of its readers is the question Harrison and Gaskin attempt to provide an answer to. The case they try to make in order to reinstate institutional interest in literary studies, however, verges on a series of logical gymnastics, power shows of erudition about the modern Western canon, as well as intricate attempts to demonstrate that literature is *useful*, maybe even profitable, inasmuch as it tells an assessable version of a/the “truth” that might resonate with (selected, I add) readers. The most striking similarity between these works is their extreme preoccupation with assessing hierarchies between a supposed “reality” and an alleged “literature”, as well as to weight the kind and quality of exchanges and relationships occurring between them through the medium of “language”. These terms recur over and over again in Gaskin and Harrison’s arguments, despite the lack of an unequivocal definition of each of them, and, unfortunately, without leading towards a concluding resolution or proposal with regards to the questions raised. Their refusal to accept parallel, heuristic, subjective ways to approach, read and make sense of a literary text seems crucial to their notion of “humanism”, and it never appears to become a hindrance to their philosophical meanderings and overall obsession with stating what “true truth” is, not only what truth in books is.

Bernard Harrison, emeritus professor at the University of Sussex, UK, and the University of Utah, USA, acknowledges his split interest in literature *and* philosophy in the short biographical statement concluding his extensive argument in favour of “literary humanism restored”, in *What Is Fiction For?* (594). Binary ordering, dichotomous theorising, aggressive/defensive stances towards other thinkers’ ideas seem to be a major structuring force behind his argumentation, which Harrison builds from the start as an unrequested “response”. His proposal is conceived as a philosophical counterbalance, and framed as a viable alternative to data-driven “sciences” and other, flawed theories. The outdatedness of literature as a respectable endeavour within the practice and inquiry of knowledge is a realisation that does not appear to sit well with Harrison. Ideally, Harrison’s aim is to convince readers that reading works of literary fiction is a valuable way to know about the world. It is unclear, however, who the readers

Harrison thinks will benefit from a restoration of humanism might be. Logical categories such as students of literature, passionate readers of fiction, perhaps even grant-assigning commissions and university department boards, editors working in general publishing or cultural policymakers are not called in. “Logical rigour” and “fidelity to the facts” appear as the main features Harrison believes to be paramount when “claiming to ‘contribute understanding’ of anything whatsoever, including the ‘human condition’ (12). Literature, Harrison convenes, is badly equipped to comply with criteria imported from radically different fields. What fiction *is* for, according to Harrison, is to “contribute special kinds of understanding of the human condition, different from those offered either by other components of the humanities or by the social sciences” (12). The reaction to written texts that Harrison seeks and describes is specifically related to the understanding of human life, a process that uses literature as a starting point towards a “cognitive effect”, that is, a flow of information concerning mental activities such as learning, knowledge-storing and memory-play that can influence behaviour. Harrison frames his “humanism” as an approach to literature and reading centred on such cognitive responses and activities. Language is Harrison’s primary concern: since he perceives it not only as the matrix and primary building block of the literary texts under examination, but as the principal “source of meaning” (68), it therefore becomes a medium that allows the hidden mechanism of societal praxis to come through (68-9). The same degree of “logical” rigour and “fidelity to the facts” cannot be demanded from literature the same way it can be expected from hard and social sciences. Harrison’s attempt, however, seeks to imitate a purportedly “scientific” approach to enquiry, a method he describes as a series of analytic stances that

[..] take their meaning from a collection of practices designed precisely to limit, if not exclude, the influence of subjective preference and wishful thinking on the conduct of scientific observation and experiment. (69)

The “objectivity” Harrison longs for is not located in the precision, accountability, or verisimilitude of literary works – Harrison does not wish to deny the utility of crossovers between literary studies and other disciplines, nor does he deny the impact of mixed

approaches such as a “social history of literature” – but is placed, rather, in the acknowledgement that literature *does* have an impact on its readers. Entertainment, emphatic enrichment, informal study, although all deeply related to concepts of reality and truth, are never addressed by Harrison as possible, desirable outcomes of reading habits. Instead, the binary link between literature and reality:

[...] seeks [meaning] in another direction, by causing the reader, through the medium of a fiction, to turn from merely *using* the language he speaks, [...] and instead turn his gaze towards the praxial interior of that language: toward the foundation of practices, social arrangements, and associated beliefs in terms of which its words acquire meaning, and thus toward the inner structure, the rationales, of the human worlds that are capable of being erected on that foundation. (Harrison 73)

The specific cognitive gain literature can offer, therefore, is structurally and topically linguistic: it teaches readers the meanings of words, that is, it allows readers to see the meaning enacted in a specific setting and linked to (virtually) infinite socially-inscribed circumstances. In praise of the “autonomy of language” (78) Harrison brings as example the universal, general capabilities of juridical vocabulary and legal jargon to craft an “uncontroversial” (78) linguistic utterance, because the items it describes (Harrison chooses “private property” as example) “belong to the world from which [they] arose, not to any particular individual participant in that world” (78). While he superficially employs this argument to argue that individual writers and speakers have a limited influence on the creation and evolution of the language(s) they chose for their works and communication (they “can only ‘listen to language’”, 78), his underlying tendency is to favour a seemingly depersonalised vision of what texts do to readers and how readers individually “do” texts as they read them.

The fundamental divide Harrison perceives in the “objectivity” that is specific and expected from the sciences, and that cannot be imposed on the literary arts, lead him to advance suspicious views towards theory-led approaches that are founded on multidisciplinary grounds. Since these methodologies often borrow ideological conclusions from other disciplines, and tend to assert claims that cannot but be political – Marxism, Deconstructionism, Feminism and Postcolonial Theory are all called in –

Harrison dubs them “the armoury of putatively prophetic and transformative ‘theory’” (97). There is a paradox animating Harrison’s appraisal of humanism: he strives to protect his idea of fiction in a positive and fruitful dialogue with the real world of its readers, while simultaneously asserting that it is preposterous to read literature on the grounds of extra-fictional reality, for instance through the lens of market-driven publishing or popular taste. To “contribute kinds of understanding of the human condition unique to it” (96) is Harrison’s literary humanist model’s overarching aim, it is also, however, a specific programme regarding the content of syllabi as well as a position that seeks to reinforce certain highbrow ideas about a “literary canon” and the dismissal of the political, extra-academic value of literature (96-8). Harrison does not point out a theoretical trajectory that would effectively help attain and develop those “cognitive gains” he sees literature able to afford, he seems to merely produce a warning against established methodologies’ biased observational points, “by the sciences and by ‘theory’” (97). How, therefore, can it be possible to properly describe and assess the implications and influences of the “systems of practice” and “patterns of meaning” (97) that Harrison recognises as paramount to human activity? Despite conceding that they “operate reciprocally to form the minds and characters of the participating individuals born into them” (97) – and going as far as to state that “meaning and the human world are not so much ‘linked’ as interwoven” (100) – any approach that is *openly* partial is dismissed.

My main point of contention with Harrison’s philosophical proposal stands against his claim that literary humanism can work independently from theories, that it is able to present and apply a clear-cut, objective gaze towards literary criticism. The neutrality Harrison dreams of is an institutional linguistic system that – with the help of reading, literature and critique – actively reflects and ponders about itself and its actions, but miraculously manages to steer clear from any form of political or ideological appraisal of itself, let alone act upon those same acknowledgements of its inner workings: a plan-less stasis, an exclusive book club, a calm exchanging of notes following extended solitary reflections. What Harrison terms “the praxial foundations of language” (68) sound like useful tools for studying and understanding the functioning logic of individuals within societal relationships, but only as far as those logics – linguistic and

political – conform to Harrison’s assumed notion of what social codes are and how useful linguistic interventions are. For instance, Harrison quickly dismisses any value to lexicographic and semantic practices that attempt a standardisation of gender-neutral terms in English. He perceives the PC recommendation that neutral descriptive terms be used consistently in conversation as an oversimplification of the “self” in action within the “social space” (217) – “‘chairperson’ rather than ‘chairman’” (217) is the example he provides to highlight the futility of said social practice. It is as if Harrison could not fathom a way for words that have already acquired a rich life and layers of meaning – through their involvement the immense system of practices, conventions, and accommodations between persons and groups that make up the life of the society of whose language they form part (217) – to be reclaimed and repurposed by the very speakers and inhabitants of those linguistic lives in order to better reflect their individual conditions and selves. Harrison, therefore, fails to grant this specific manipulation of language – and its consequent leverage on social habits – the same status, complexity and beauty he perceives elsewhere, namely in the texts of so-called “high literature”.

This discussion introduces Harrison’s analysis of gendered interpersonal patterns in Virginia Woolf’s experimental novel *To the Lighthouse*.⁷ Woolf, Harrison argues, uses her fiction to explore the limits of objectivity in her characters’ private selves, public lives and their narrative self-representations (216-25). Harrison’s key critical insight is that Woolf’s major achievement is her ability to describe her characters’ consciousness as, simultaneously, unable to fully present themselves publicly, and aware of the societal constrictions that hinder their need and desire to project their interior lives outwardly. A situation which ostensibly presents as especially telling of this duality is the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. “Much of what contributes to personality is not personal but interpersonal” writes Harrison (231): Lily Briscoe’s relapse into 1920s standard feminine social training in order to survive her public interactions with the other Ramsey’s (male) guests, along with Mrs Ramsey nose-y matchmaking attitudes and adoring submission to “masculine intelligence’s marvellous power to sustain the world”

⁷ Harrison discusses his theoretical framework by providing various case-studies in the second part of *What is Fiction for?*. The chapter on Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is the first of a series including discussions of works by Aharon Appelfeld, Charles Dickens, Laurence Sterne and D.H. Lawrence among others.

(219) are stripped from its gendered specificities and recast as a mere indication of literary prowess on the part of the author. Harrison operates a formally feminist reading of the Lily Briscoe's passages, but sanitises it from any "theory"-related lexicon or signs of methodological whining: "the novel shows beautifully how this elaborate dance of accommodation, this fitting of the masculine and the feminine roles to one another, has both its splendours and its miseries" (220). Harrison ascribes to Woolf's proficient literary technique the same legitimate concerns and importance that he denies theoreticians whose approach is overtly political: when Woolf highlights hideous societal double standards she is making great art – and supposedly fostering great cognitive gain – but when those same discrepancies in people's treatment are tackled directly as well as critically, they are described (negatively) as "problems optimistically addressed" (217).

Harrison's humanism is an attempt to correct the dissimulation and mystification that he perceives as intrinsic features of philosophical experiences stemming from theory-led approaches. Their tendency to place their own methodology as the object of their own critique, thus starting off a chain of critique-of-critique, is a bias that strikes Harrison as particularly inefficient in pointing out, or even amend, foundational mistakes. Overall, Harrison's dismissal of "didactic journalism masquerading as literature" (230) is purportedly justified by his grander hope for an encompassing way to read and think about (highbrow) literary matters. His supposedly wholesome brand of humanism, however, reads rather like an unswerving, one-size-fits-all reduction of critical examination. Its supposed general, universal reach risks flattening out all specificities and diversity, not so much in the bland or stilted reading of the primary sources by common readers, but predominantly in the marketplace of critique. Harrison's active proposal is to re-accommodate plotting and narrativity as the critical fundamental of literary and philosophical analysis: a sort of common principle of narrativity, which locates sense in narrative forms. He envisages this turn specifically through a conscious switch from "interpretative" to "reactive" criticism (290-8). The principle of unity animating the artworks, as well as the author's overarching ideas, seem of no interest to Harrison (335), since his true concern (and a proper reactive reader's) is the identification of meaning, its affects and the stylistic forms that bring it forth. Harrison

detects linguistic and literary structures that allow the text to work first and foremost as strings of meaningful sentences (299, 301-3); he then proceeds to acknowledge contextual signifiers as paramount devices that allow the understanding of each sentence by taking into account who, where, why and how they say it (301-2).

Interpretative critical enquiry is, according to Harrison, a paranoid reading mode that constantly perceives the text as a symbol of larger matters and/or patterns located outside the text, and therefore takes advantage of the text in order to put forward a specific ideological agenda (311). For *reactive* critics, on the other hand, text is key, albeit it is not the only source they allow, it is crucial to ground one's reading into the primary text. Their approach is focused and detail-oriented – “Woolf is concerned with the slightness of the moral issues” (315) – rather than far-reaching or interdisciplinary:

[Reactive critics] tend to write as individual men or women, without political or theoretical baggage. Because of that they are primarily concerned with expressing a personal reaction to the text, and only secondarily, if at all, with relating it to collective social or political concerns. (Harrison 315)

Similar stances develop Harrison's earlier claim that popular notions such as “the meaning of the literary work” should be replaced by “the bearings of the work” (306), thus upholding a reading mode that appeases readers' tension when “trying to make sense” of a work of fiction by keeping in proximity with the text. Harrison's humanism, therefore, as expressed through literary studies and literary critique, seemingly bears the look and scope of a private endeavour, a supposedly laudable occupation that describes generic “cognitive gains” through an aseptic close-reading of canonised texts. In the introductory pages to *What Is Fiction For?*, Harrison acknowledges the similarities in the subject matter tackled in his book and in Richard Gaskin's earlier work: “Gaskin and I both confront the question of how a work of literature, depending for its production on the creative invention of its author, can claim to capture anything worth calling reality” (xiii). In *Language, Truth and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism* (2013), Gaskin offers a working definition of “literature” that is not related to the idea of “fictionality”, but rather grounded in a notion of “truth”, that is, as an intellectual action that simultaneously reaches for the truth – is “factualist” in character – and builds truth –

has “factual” capabilities (38). Fictional literature *can* convey important truths, Gaskin convenes, and it operates through the implied operator “it is fictionally true that”: the cognitive value, therefore, lies in the fact that each reader is required to fill in the fictional world with features of the real world they inhabit, but is then rewarded with the experience of vicarious living of feelings and relationships. Gaskin, who teaches philosophy of language at the university of Liverpool, sets his book as an extension, a sort of functional display of his original philosophical theory: Linguistic Idealism.⁸ According to Gaskin’s conception, objects that are present in the world exist in virtue of the fact that they can be referred to by specific words, therefore are dependent, asymmetrically, on language (13). Gaskin, like Harrison, is a firm believer in the power of literature to foster cognitive gains – i.e. that fictional literary works refer to the real world in ways that allow us to learn important truths from them – so much so that cognitive value is ranked as equivalent to the aesthetic and literary value of a work of fiction. Nevertheless, Gaskin seems even more vocal than Harrison in exposing his doubts about reader-response theory and the politicisation of literary theory. His stances can also be clearly deduced from the book’s leading argument: imaginative works of literature bear an objective meaning established at the time of creation, a fixed intention that is in no way susceptible to (either contemporary or later) readers’ response (24). As early as in his book’s preface, Gaskin posits this “fixed meaning” as what the critic-interpreter seeks to locate and decode (viii-ix). In Gaskin’s ideal vision of literary criticism, a thorough knowledge of historic context appears instrumental (along with techniques such as the paraphrase) in creating an explanation of the text geared towards the exposition and exploration of the text’s intrinsic meaning: the aim of interpretation is to extract the objective meaning planted at the time of production (38). Part of this process has to do with the critic’s ability to recognise the terms and meanings authors employ which belong to specific worldly materialities. These become, therefore, “general truths” which the writer conveys and which are, crucially, assessable in terms of said author’s *reliability*, not only through their coherence with the historical

⁸ Gaskin’s article “From the Unity of the Proposition to Linguistic Idealism” in *Synthese* (2019) summarises the theory he had previously developed in book form with *Experience of the World’s Own Language* (2006) and *The Unity of the Proposition* (2008).

context that critics must already be familiar with. Overall, Gaskin sets up a constrictive, although vague, notion of “literary works” that does not even mention works such as creative responses (spin-offs, follow-ups, reboots, instalments, adaptations, fan-fictions, etc.) as either “literary works” on their own terms or as even as spurious forms of criticism.

The first chapter, “The Context Principle: Relationship between Word and Language” engages with Gaskin’s linguistic idealism as applied to the pragmatic linguistic forms detectable in literary works. Gaskin drafts a genealogy, a hierarchy of sorts when describing linguistic creative functions: he grants that speakers’ compositional and recursive understanding of sentences can help spread new sentences created out of new or twisted words, yet he places in the word as unit the fundamental building block of meaning. The world inscribed into language is not made up of sentences, but rather of propositions, which he terms “linguistic accusatives” (21). The contextualising process happening at a sentence-level is demoted to a secondary position of importance. It is, however, on the “truth-condition” of sentences that Gaskin locates the fundamental connection between language and the world, a relationship that is determined by language and its naming capabilities rather than on physical and public objects themselves:

Cats and mats and countries and wisdom and superposition and inflation and numbers: these things are in the world because they figure in propositionally structured combinations of the level of reference. (Gaskin 11)

Gaskin’s linguistic idealism perceives the world as expressible in language, stating that “what there is, is sayable” (14). The generic reach of linguistic idealism, however, does not appear to expressly take into account languages other than, presumably, the English Gaskin is employing to expound his theory. How does the “sayability” that is paramount to existence relates to translations and its related issues? Phenomena such as ideas “lost in translation”, gaps in specific vocabularies, neologisms and linguistic borrowings from other languages, unequal presence of objects and cultural signifiers in either source or target language all deal with the friction between what exists and either needs, or fails, to be expressed linguistically. The catch-22 of linguistic idealism widens

the gap between word and world: are words captions for objects or is the meaning intrinsic to the object itself that makes its existence possible in the world? Not even diachronic linguistic layers seem to play a role in Gaskin's strictly synchronic idealism. Problematizing instances such the coexistence of communication systems that are not language or word-based, the geographic limitedness of languages, the vast and ever-growing families of extinct languages, the rapid obsolescence and constant renewal of languages – along with the survival of linguistic fossils, or the inventions of new, artificial languages from scratch – cannot but affect peremptory hierarchies, defined as such: "objects (including properties and relations) are simply the referential aspect of word meaning" (15). Gaskin includes human influence only in passing – he acknowledges that his idealism is "linguistic" and not "mentalistic", conceding that experiences of the world in terms other than linguistic is possible (14) – but there is an uncanny lack of presence and participation throughout his work.

Mirroring Harrison's implicitly elitist stance towards written words and their readers, Gaskin claims that:

Individual readers can fail to respond appropriately to a literary work, as can whole communities of readers; this fact shows that these responses cannot constitute literary value. (24)

Since Gaskin's purpose is to "ascribe a fully objective property" to literature (24), in ways that not only pertain to the "fixed meaning" inscribed in the text, but also encompasses modes of reading and personal expectations that lead individual people to open a book, his penchant for the denial of multiplicity, conflict, and heterogeneity of intention in literary texts is unsurprising. On the one hand, Gaskin pens affable definitions of literary humanism that apparently cast language and literature in a positive and functional connection to the real world. It looks almost as if literature were in service of everyday reality:

Or can we say that what is special about literary language is not the world it creates, but the way in which it talks about the world created by ordinary language? On that approach, literature would have as its subject matter the familiar world of our everyday

discourse, but it would talk about that world in a special, perhaps unique way. (23)

His actual intention, however, stems clearly from authoritative claims such as “literary value is a normative matter, but the act of projecting something onto something else is a purely causal transaction [...]” (24), a suggestion that seems to predict a standardised, automated mode of reading and thinking about literature.

When Gaskin discusses the existence of non-English speaking cultural debates, he brackets his note within a concerned proposal that fully denies cultural relativism and, consequently, exposes his Anglo-centric outlook: “There must, then, be a normative dimension to the identification of critical communities” (35), he writes against the idea that any social group and order organically develop and sustain original forms of art and the criteria to assess it.⁹ Translation, furthermore, is an issue that Gaskin takes into account, albeit briefly, and merely as a structural hindrance rather than a necessary and complex form of communication. Gaskin perceives as a problem the fact that non-English-speaking communities might affix the corresponding word for “art” with semantic layers of meaning different than in English, therefore precluding the possibility of a supposedly “equal” assessment of cultural artefacts produced outside the Anglosphere. Such views extend to the meaning of “cognitive value”, a quality that, Gaskin admits, might be as subjective as each language and conceptions of art are (therefore changing radically from a cultural to another), and therefore inadequate to work as the unifying, common feature that is perceived as indispensable in order to classify and categorise the entirety of human literary production.

Humanism, therefore, is treated and conceptualised as an apparently praiseworthy ideal underlying literary texts, but, most importantly, as a moral quality embedded in the act of reading and thinking publicly about those texts. Harrison and Gaskin’s humanism, however, betrays a certain inclination towards order, classification, hierarchy and, consequently, exclusion and dismissal, that inevitably unveils their specific worldview. An outlook that cannot but reveal political undertones masked behind a presumed

⁹ Specifically, Gaskin dismisses James Young’s claim, expressed in *Art and Knowledge*, that art “is whatever a society says is art at any given time”, a stance he later defines as “unacceptable relativism” (35).

neutrality and an impressionistic notion of self-betterment by means of written words. Both Harrison and Gaskin provide plenty of insightful commentaries on texts drawn from the Western canon in order to back up their musings of technical notions such as fictionality and verisimilitude in literary texts, hence displaying their proficient and well-read philosophical scholarship. They seldom, if ever, take into account literary examples that have been imported (and translated) from non-English speaking realms. Their reluctant inclusion of theoretical approaches that, historically, have dealt with texts as tools, means-to-an-end or allegories of extra-textual realities, rather than fixed, sacred entities, proves limiting, and unacceptably so for readers that do not conform to the hegemonic identity and values endorsed and embodied by Harrison and Gaskin. The cognitive gain occurring on Gaskin and Harrison's methodological and canonical terms risks proving, in the long run, an unreceptive exercise in academic power and conservative control. The following chapter section will address instances of older literary criticism, methodologies and original theories about the narrative arts that have dealt creatively and sensibly with the compresence of different cultures and linguistic traditions, and whose authors generally benefited from a self-imposed critical distancing from the cultural and historical context they sought to describe and understand.

1.2. Stories: Inventing the Past

It was hardly surprising to realise, at the final stage of my research, that the set of theories that I had found the most illuminating, expansive and creative had generally been developed by thinkers coming from or operating outside hegemonic Anglophone circuits, or whose effort to be highly cognizant of the framework they were operating in demanded their radical distancing from it. It is not lost on me that scholars whose work I encountered in translation, or which they themselves wrote in a second language – that is, work that does not presupposes English as a universal linguistic matrix – were those I resonated with the most. Their ideas remained clear in my memory long after reading about them, and the pace of their argumentations struck me as particularly attentive to acknowledging how cultural difference, individual mobility, learning curves and varying degrees of accessibility to and availability of material resources influence one's

intellectual output. This chapter section provides a limited overview of cultural and literary theories elaborated at different moment of the twentieth century in different parts of Europe: my intention is not to fully cover the modern history of the academic humanities focusing on the literary arts and theory, but rather, to signpost the work whose input significantly influenced and improved my own thinking. It will start with Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's notions of "chronotope" and "heteroglossia" in literary works, then go on to describe Yuri Lotman's evolving notion of cultural semiosis up to the concept of "semiosphere". Finally, it will tackle Julia Kristeva's use of the semiotic in her analysis of the symbolic, and will conclude with an appraisal of the methodology used by Stuart Hall in his cultural history of popular media consumption. Overall, among the recurring themes that connect all the aforementioned systems, is a relevant interest towards a perceived cultural past and its telling modes: historiography, mythological narrative, symbolic parable, genre-specific literary specimen, non-verbal cultural signifiers and instantly recognizable stereotypes. How the past is told, preserved and reused to renew, fortify its meaning, or even as a basis for wholly new signification, is a crucial interest that informs much of my own thinking in the case studies I present later on.

1.2.1. Voice (Mikhail Bakhtin)

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's¹⁰ marginalization from official academic circuits during his lifetime, the ostracism that resulted into confinement in Soviet labour camps and subsequent years of exile, the late recognition of his intellectual work in Russia as well as in translation abroad: the accumulation of such tragic contingencies appear to haunt Bakhtin's heterogeneous body of philosophical and critical work that was brought to new

¹⁰ Throughout the section I will spell the name Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin following British conventional romanization system for consistency with the language of the thesis. In addition, I want to clarify that translations in either Italian or English of Lotman's texts were consulted, and whenever a reference is quoted from an Italian source, the English translation is to be understood as mine, whereas the name of the English translator is always noted in the text. I am also aware of the different publishing history of Lotman's work in Italy and in the UK/US, hence the compresence of (untranslated) references and quotations from the Italian translations within the English text.

light in the USSR during the 1960's, a few years before his death.¹¹ Publishing and public platforms were denied to him during his lifetime: after the publication in 1929 of his monographic work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, no work penned by Bakhtin appeared until its riedition in 1963, followed in 1965 by the publication of his thesis on Rabelais, which he had defended (quite unsuccessfully) in Moscow, at the Gorky Institute of World Literature, in 1946. It seems logical, and quite apt, that Bakhtin's greatest accomplishment with regards to scholarship and knowledge networks was the informal, itinerant "circles" that he formed in whichever Soviet provincial town he happened to move to in order to work. His meetings outside of an educational environment with like-minded intellectuals living far from urban centres – all of them free from the imperatives of career-oriented intellectual production, and therefore free to pursue erudition for its own sake, or at least without the need to cautiously follow academic guidelines and fashions – likely provided Bakhtin with the peer-to-peer advice and dialogue he did not find elsewhere. Despite the namesake "Bakhtin Circle", the network did not operate as a distinct school of philosophy following Bakhtin's exclusive direction, or pursuing his specific line of thought: the sense of community and friendship among its same-level participants organically oriented the collaboration around themes of shared interest, promoted each member's individual specialization and values, and often crossed over from intellectual exchange into daily life cohabitation, and eventually

¹¹ While Bakhtin's bibliography in Russian gradually became available from the 1960's onwards, outside the USSR Bakhtin's fame arguably built on Julia Kristeva's reference to Bakhtin notions of intertextuality and dialogism as discussed in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World* in her essay "Le mot, le dialogue et le roman", first published in *Séméiôtikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Seuil 1969), translated in English as "Word, Dialogue and Novel" and collected in *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Columbia UP 1980). In it, Kristeva summarises the major terms and themes in Bakhtin's and highlights the consistent viability of his research, which she defines as an approach to literature that swaps "the linguist's technical rigour" (64) for an approach that frames literary texts in a relation with other texts and structures. The "intertextuality" that Kristeva sees as crucial in Bakhtinian philosophy and philology denotes his understanding of "writing as a reading of the anterior literary corpus and the text as an absorption of and a reply to another text" (69). Kristeva's own take on Bakhtinian "dialogism", "carnavalesque" and "polyphony" is an account that employs logical tools, such as the 0-1 binary, in order to analytically vouchsafe the semiosis undertaken by Bakhtin.

pooled the participants into the disastrous experience of imprisonment and exile. The polyphony that Bakhtin came to illustrate as a literary device possibly finds its closer correlative and inspiration in the polymorphous conversation brought to life by a plurality of intellectual voices and minds. It is also tempting to read in Bakhtin official silencing and *de facto* ostracization from public discourse as the starting point of his evaluation of dialogue as a major shaping force in any expressive communication aspiring to artistic status. Still, it is hardly surprising that the sites of knowledge that Bakhtin found hidden – or unacknowledged – in vernacular expressions of spontaneity and creativity are at the core of his general theory of art and language, whose main preoccupation is the appraisal of a plurality and specificity of discourses, rather than the definition of an all-embracing universality. This chapter section is meant to provide a brief overview of the most prominent critical notions advanced by Bakhtin in his theoretical work, especially the notions pertaining to the overarching key concept of “polyphony”: “heteroglossia”, “dialogism” and “chronotope”.

Bakhtin’s idiosyncratic rejection of disciplinary insularity results into a consistent mixture of methodological instruments from linguistics, philology, literary history and criticism, semiotics and philosophy: the links Bakhtin established between the fields showcase and are informed by his notion of “dialogue”, which he understands as a movable feature in the production and appraisal of communicative acts. Bakhtin’s “dialogue”, and “dialogic” as a major stylistic and ethical attribute, is inevitably complemented by the notion of “listening”, the acknowledgement that any assertion is open-ended, requiring participation, feedback and personalised responses, which is moreover impossible to manage only by means of prejudice, criticism and systematization. Bakhtin’s critical attention towards the realm of “aestheticized language” in the form of, predominantly, novels, results into a vision of the blending between the book’s literary world and the reader’s real world as a crucial act of dialogic dynamism: if, on the one hand, the novel absorbs vital aspects of real life into its fictional subject matter, on the other the reader’s act of *reading* – along with its material circumstances, variable in space and time – also communicates with the text according to principles that transcend the mere literary framework, and embrace social, historical and contextual elements. Contributing to the richness of literary works is the structural compresence of a range of what Bakhtin

names “speech genres”, that is, the linguistic capability to modify register, vocabulary, syntax, genre conventions in order to flex communication and match it to the appropriate context and situation. Any novel will contain diverse speech patterns, and will imitate context-appropriate communicative performances. Bakhtin’s aesthetic theory, in fact, opens on a rather pragmatic note, as the artwork – framed in an inaugural chapter of *Questions of Literature and Aesthetics (Estetica e romanzo 1979)* titled “The Problem of Literary Creation” – is promptly edged in this definition:

[...] *organized material*, as a thing, can bear meaning only as a physical stimulus of physiological and psychological conditions, or else, it needs receiving a utilitarian, practical destination. (*Estetica e romanzo 10-1*)

The demarcation that logically ensues, as opposing terms, between form and content, however, is a problematic categorization in Bakhtin’s description of aesthetic understanding. While conceding that the hedonistic appreciation of material forms needs be accompanied by an assessment, if not an appraisal, of the meaningfulness of its content, Bakhtin states that “material aesthetics” always blur the univocal relationships occurring between the “object” and its external appearance, the “artwork”. Thus advocating for a slanting form of epistemology, Bakhtin singles out his foundational independence from any systematic approach whose purpose is the mere detailed, consistent and coherent organization of artistic objects. Instead, he states that “The object of aesthetic analysis is the content of aesthetic activity (or contemplation) directed at the artwork itself” (*Estetica e romanzo 12*). The discrepancy between Bakhtin’s very conception of how to indicate, describe and assess the artistic object and Western-based tradition of semiotic methodologies is rooted in such subject-oriented conception of the values perceived to be integral to the artwork itself. Bakhtin seemingly retrieves the Saussurean coupling of *langue* (the linguistic standard) and *parole* (the speaker’s act) as the basis to develop his own notion of genre and, specifically, “speech genre”, whereby he seeks to describe how any verbal assertion exists within and by reason of a specific genre of discourse, a standardized pattern of sorts that distinguishes the register of speaking acts according to their function and context. In his

chapter “The problem of speech genres” (“Il problema dei generi del discorso” in *L'autore e l'eroe*, trans. Clara Strada Janovič, 1988) Bakhtin theorises a two-tier system. Primary, or simple genres, codify everyday social interactions and its roles – words have a pragmatic, objective function. Secondary, or indirect genres are complex because they describe and represent the primary, everyday genres *as literature* – words are employed studiously, as testimony of the transmission enacted, and measure of its quality – their metalinguistic capability is outstretched towards the possibility of a mutual comprehension. Speech genres, therefore, complement and deepen the pragmatic function of language as they codify communication standards that single out context-related expressive needs according to certain combinations, and by using specific phrases, utterances and vocabulary. Speech genres arguably delimitate linguistic realms in a way that mediates, but also limits and directs each speaker's linguistic agency within the communicative act they wish to perform “correctly”, by following speech genre-related conventions. Technical jargons, domain-specific vocabularies, dialects, etcetera, all contribute to meaningfulness and usefulness by providing ideological and cultural volume to language in a temporal dimension: Bakhtin indicates with the term “chronotope” the contextual and temporal references that enmesh any speech-genre's existence, and which are inextricably connected. Chronotopes are largely responsible for the sense of “situatedness” which inevitably permeates any literary work, that is, they crystallise the organisational principles that were valid at the time of writing.

Bakhtin's definition of “genre” is not limited to formal literary typologies – lyric poetry, novel, theatre, etc. – since none of them is intrinsically a dialogic or a monologic form: any text can evoke a polyphony of viewpoints and vocal expressions if it seriously and consistently commits to “active listening” as an aesthetic stance that limits the single “I”'s narrative monopoly. This, however, does not imply that well-established “one voice” narrative devices – monologues, free indirect discourse, internal stream of consciousness, etcetera – are irretrievably bound to self-contained monologism. On the contrary, Bakhtin stresses that the act of reasoning that triggers and motivates any single-person speech is intrinsically dialogic, because it takes into account the outside existence, interaction and meaning of the (unaddressed) other, without any attempt at

subjugation. Nevertheless, the unsurmountable boundary that is the “other” – who is impossible to fully subject fully since their mind will remain unknowable – is not a clear-cut positive aspect: the individual cannot but resort to dialogue in order to negotiate their own position in the world. Through the encounter with the other their identity will shape and, inevitably, shrink so as to respect the other’s equal presence. The dialogue provided in literary texts is not necessarily the sign of open-mindedness, tolerance or communion, rather, its shiniest examples meddle with dialogic efforts rendered as inevitable contact, a failed retreat into indifference, self-sufficiency and closure.¹² The “dialogic” feature of literary texts is but a single component (albeit one than single-handedly highlights characters’ interactivity) of a grander artistic vision resulting in full-fledged “poliphony”. The relationships which Bakhtin perceives as touchstones in his literary philosophy are expressed via the contextual specificities of speech-genres, which offer a key and are able to guide dialogical connections towards a joint direction. In fact, the systemic employment of dialogic narrative is precisely the factor that, according to Bakhtin, will define the overall effect of polyphony, which he describes as a situation of inescapable dialogic interaction, totally devoid of an omniscient, or external third party commenting or “making sense” of the exchange. Proximity and intimacy with the other cannot be fulfilled via identification or purportedly objective, neutral portrayal: the dialogic moment is as much a clash, a reckoning, a re-negotiation of instances describing the lived reality of the interlocutors involved as an alternation of utterances. The notion of reality thus gauged cannot be understood as a universal, philosophical truth: via the dialogue with/against the other, the realm of knowledge and experience is but touched upon. The synchronous utterance of singular points of view by a multiplicity of (separate) voices cannot coalesce into a un universal, “monological” truth: the dialogism Bakhtin invokes does not contemplate the possibility of consolidation, rather, it merely indicates the necessary stratification of contrasting meanings. Bakhtin expands dialogism into the concept of “heteroglossia”, a feature best expressed in novels, whereby the overall effect of world-building is rooted in the relentless friction and cohabitation between different types of speeches: those voiced by

¹² Bakhtin’s “dialogue”, moreover, is not equivalent to the narrative device that dramatises or stylises conversation as the foremost communicative strategy.

characters, the speech of the narrator and, separately, the speech of the author. Meaning is therefore refracted between different “languages”, since each speech serves a specific purpose by borrowing and repurposing other languages, jargons, dialects and shifting registers. In his essay “Words in Novels” (“La parola nel romanzo” in *Estetica e romanzo*, trans. Clara Strada Janovič, 1979), Bakhtin thus explains the competing, yet integrated utterance of different speeches:

A narrator’s discourse is always a *third-party discourse* – with regards to the author’s own overt discourse – delivered in a *third-party language* – with regards to the variety of literary languages, which is in itself at odds with the narrator’s own language. (122)

It is important to note that Bakhtin situates the author’s own “speech” at the same level (that is, enmeshed and almost indistinguishable from others) as all the competing speeches. The idea that originality is paramount to novelty, extravagance, personalism in literary creativity is rejected by Bakhtin: whenever a dialogic structure succeeds, heteroglossia assures the polyphonic character of the literary work via the author’s original *combination* of existing language and speech-genres.¹³

¹³ Syncretism and mutual influence by means of inevitable contact underlie Bakhtin’s theory of literature, but also overlap into his conception of history and social theory. The inevitable mutual influence between elite and popular genres is at the heart of his major work on Rabelais and the spirit of carnivalesque. Moreover, In the chapter devoted to further problematization of his “speech-genres” theory in *L’autore e l’eroe* (“The Author and the Hero”), Bakhtin insightfully grafts a discussion about projective intimacy in literary texts onto his philological appraisal of Early Modern progressive familiarization of traditional literary modes with popular linguistic codes. Just like Renaissance culture appropriated a Medieval worldview by elevating familiar and lowly styles towards the positive visibility granted by an “official” status, the sense of closeness, frankness, communicative ease combined with officiality in literary texts is a feature dictated primarily by contextual changes and updates in social norms. “If we dismiss the relationship between the speaker, the *other* and with their utterances (either real or expected), it will be impossible to understand genre and style of any discourse” (288) writes Bakhtin to highlight the importance of dialogic practices in communicative performances: no expressive form can do without the prediction and the actual response from a real or imagined addressee of the speech.

The decentralised literary system that Bakhtin celebrates and describes via the term “polyphonic” is generally a feature of novels that are able to convey a set of ideas disenfranchised from the author’s outlook by means of organic, layered and contrasting presentation of characterial consciousnesses and narratorial stances. The resulting plurality is the condition and result of a diverse ensemble of voices whose role and importance is understood as equally influential within the textual economy, each valid in itself, as a singular voice, as well as the expression of the authorial intention. The underlying motion is described by Bakhtin as “dialogism”, whereby the balance achieved within the text is fundamentally different and immune from the yearning for monologic truth that characterises Western philosophical and ethical traditions, whereby a singular settlement, a logic, a victory must prevail in a multitude of clashing stances. Not only the author must abandon the illusion (and the stylistic convention) of total control and their foundational primacy, in order to create a polyphonic literary text the utterances represented in the text need not conform to a set standard, or coalesce into a shared ideological standpoint. The compresence of characterial, narratorial and authorial points of view also needs a range of linguistic registers, “speech genres” that evoke and represent authentic linguistic performances, whose presence crystallised in the text bespeak certain time and space-specific features, or “chronotopes”. The blend of linguistic varieties, jargons and dialects – including code-switching and hierarchies of registers and lexicons – will therefore contribute to shape the experience of the world as conceptualized in the literary work according to the principle of “heteroglossia”: hybridity and mutual influence between cultural levels, fictional and real worlds are therefore treated as theoretical keystones by Bakhtin throughout his production. The following chapter section will address another Russian thinker in his philosophical approach to literature: Yuri Lotman semiotic elaboration of literary histories is not limited to textual examples, but broaches instances of cultural generation, conservation and reproduction – specifically with his original notion of “semiosphere” – which go in tandem with issues of cultural understanding echoing Bakhtin’s own preoccupation with the ways texts and the contexts they preserve survive the passing of time.

1.2.2. System (Yuri Lotman)

Russian literary historian and semiotician Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman¹⁴ helped found and direct, and to some extent came to embody, the informally called Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics: more of network of scholars and thinkers than a brick-and-mortar academic department, its active years coincided with Lotman's turn to structural semiotics in the early 1960's up his death in 1993. Lotman's early academic specialization in modern Russian philology and literary biographical research grounded his later interest in semiotic theory and its development as a theory of culture. The introduction of semiotic approaches to Sovietic academic networks proved successful because it allowed official institutions to pursue humanistic research by means of a vocabulary that could sidestep political terms, nuances and allusions, while simultaneously being intelligible for international (academic) audiences, thus working on even grounds with thinkers from outside the USSR. However, In *The Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics* (2008), Maxim Waldstein argues that the Tartu group acted as the only consistent network "parallel" to the official Soviet system of scholarly research and distribution: especially in its mature phases, the periodicals linked to the Tartu group were the only space in which marginal approaches or non-normative subjects could be published. After his appointment as professor at the University of Tartu in 1954, Lotman gradually expanded his research interest in eighteenth century Russian literature to include contemporary writers and, eventually, cultural semiotics. In particular, his main objective was the formulation of an exact, quasi-scientific vocabulary – a universal "metalanguage" – which could simplify discipline-specific descriptions and clarify the communication of humanistic research. The semiotic approach which Lotman and his school revisited did not centre on philosophical speculation concerning the actual formation of human signs, but rather

¹⁴ Throughout the section I will spell the name Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman following British conventional romanization system for consistency with the language of the thesis. In addition, I want to clarify that translations in either Italian or English of Lotman's texts were consulted, and whenever a reference is quoted from an Italian source, the English translation is to be understood as mine, whereas the name of the English translator is always noted in the text. I am also aware of the different publishing history of Lotman's work in Italy and in the UK/US, hence the compresence of (untranslated) references and quotations from the Italian translations within the English text.

dispersed and enriched its discussions by welcoming a wide range of subjects deemed fit for analysis (at one point of his career, Lotman also included reflections about sleep, or feelings such as anger and fear alongside more conventional literary appraisals). Lotman's fundamental stance that culture is information fosters his notion of the linguistic matrix of culture: it is a human construct that is not inheritable (like genome, for instance), but rather passed down and passed around as a communal, social act. Language is the building block of culturization: by acts like "naming", humans are able to appropriate and construct in semiotic terms almost any "natural" object and turn them (or rather, codify them) into cultural phenomena.¹⁵ Language becomes the "primary modelling system" for the Tartu group: it gives a shape and a meaning to things, and stands as a blueprint for any other cultural system, such as religion, law, scientific knowledge and all forms of narrative, from mythologies to art. The image of "building block" that I mentioned earlier is crucial: while culture is perceived by Lotman as an ever-growing and ever-expanding system, it still exists in discrete and finite units. The natural realm that, according to Lotman, exists alongside human formations, is in contact and feeds the culture, but is a system whose functioning is fully *other*, inhabited by forces that are decidedly non-human, and possibly beyond the human scope. The incessant cycle of reproductivity, as well as biological evolution in uninterrupted motion eventually englobe and overcome the individual's life and specific contribution. Above all, Lotman's nature/culture divide is especially concerned with the essential absence of linguistic instances in the former realm, and with the fundamental presence of "languagelike" formations in the latter. "Secondary modelling systems" imitate the shape and mechanisms of natural language, but also overlap and obscure it: systems like the

¹⁵ In the essay "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" ("Sul meccanismo semiotico della cultura") – jointly written with Boris Uspenskij – Lotman carefully indicates that the very acknowledgment of the semiotic nature of culture is a cultural fact, hence, a variable from one culture to another. While a given human group may understand the relationships between sign and signifier, or between expression and content, as univocal and universal (and arguably unchangeable), another might prefer to view names and linguistic signs as arbitrary, casually attributed and therefore conventionally employed (and thus susceptible to change). Names, naming, identity etcetera have a primary role in the former type of culture, whereas the latter tend to place more emphasis and grant attention to the content of what is expressible and/or expressed (*Semiotica e cultura* 72).

aforementioned law, religion, and art, among others, are, therefore, both communicative channels that successfully convey information, and “modelling” system that, by describing the realities of world in a certain way, also influence and modify them. A triangulation involving “society-communication-culture” (*Semiotica e cultura* 92) as the semiotic backbone of any (meaningful) system informs the creations and combination of any of the discrete elements they contain, whose continuous combination and random variation either aspire to a level of stability or produce an “avalanche” effect (93), thus quickly absorbing new information to foster the whole system’s further development.

In his essay “Thesis on Art as a Secondary Modelling System” (in *Semiotica e cultura*, 1975), Lotman breaks his arguments in smaller points – brief thesis-like statements – and identifies the process of analogy as the foundational requirement of any modelling system, that is, “[...] the structured union of elements and rules” (thesis 1.3.1, 4), operating according to relations of analogy with the totality of knowable objects. Point 1.4 specifically states the use of language as a matrix for these secondary systems – including the arts – which therefore create “second-degree languages” (4). In the 1975 essay “On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture” (collected in *Semiotica e cultura* and jointly written with his collaborator Boris Uspenskij), Lotman posits culture as either a “complex ensemble of texts” and “a text-generating device”, in which “text”¹⁶ is understood as “the realization of a culture’s intrinsic potential” (74). Any given culture also develops a specific explanation of its own relationship with the way texts come to be: texts can either illustrate the rules whereby society regulates itself, or, conversely, texts are only acknowledged and accepted as such when they comply with a set of rules. In the first case, “rules are defined as a set of precedents”, in the second case, “precedents only exist whereby they are represented in their corresponding rule” (74). The “program”, as Lotman terms it, that concentrates a culture’s totality of existing rules

¹⁶ In *Analysis of the Poetic Text (Analisi del testo poetico, 1972)*, Lotman also specifies the three essential components that characterise a “text” with artistic ambitions and world-building potentiality. A text necessarily responds to criteria of *expressivity*, by way of the signs of a natural language; *delimitation*, whereby a given text fulfils a certain cultural function, but can also accommodate a series of semiotic sub-levels that enlarge its potential meaning; *structure*, hence developing not as a mere succession of signs, but as a complex signifying organism composed of hierarchical levels and sub-texts (65-9).

also serves as the “memory of the collectivity” (*Semiotica e cultura* 67), that is, a repository which collects the bulk of human experience and transforms it into culture, hence filtering what is deemed necessary and worthy of preservation and transmission. Hence, culture is “non-hereditary” (66), its formation and preservation are dictated exclusively by the people who inhabit it. Lotman also includes a discussion of the “forgetting device” of culture as a fundamental part of the memory itself: to forget by elimination, oblivion, sidelining, marginalisation complements the archiving, curating, reissuing and transmitting of any cultural memory (70). Besides, it is by constantly picking which texts should be preserved and passed on, and which should, conversely, be eliminated and forgotten, that the culture keeps its generative potential active, thus creating *new* texts out of old material, or by occupying the newly-freed space, even if the energy springing out of this friction often results in a real “cultural struggle” (71).¹⁷ Lotman clearly states, however, that the texts are not reality in and of itself, rather, they are the “material” instances that “reconstruct” reality: it follows that the semiotic assessment of any given text – how a self-contained system works, what its values and rules are – should precede the historical placement of the same (*Semiotica e cultura* 70). Comparisons with analogous, contemporary textual systems, in addition to the assessment of their meaning in a specific time frame, should both pertain to a secondary analytic phase, one, moreover, that is intrinsically informed by the observer’s own cultural assumptions and value system.

Lotman’s awareness of the heavy influence of social conditionings in the gradual formation of cultural clusters of meaning and objects is consistently pronounced in his analyses of the products resulting from human cultures. His training as a literary historian very likely influenced Lotman’s specialization in the semiotics of literary texts, which he consistently understood as inherently linked with the historical context they

¹⁷ Lotman also stresses how culture’s forgetting device is a primary ideological instrument, since different political frameworks need to promote a cultural worldview whose products – or rather, *texts* – reflect and explain social living according to a given set of terms, and therefore will actively forget and delete anything that does not comply with the sense of history and collectivity wished for by the ruling organisms. The “crystallization” of shared cultural memory leads to its reduction, whereas a healthy culture maintains its elasticity and dynamicity, thus constantly enlarging itself, as well as its social life (*Semiotica e cultura* 71).

were produced in, while also able to reconstruct, by representing it, the world they pertain(ed) to. The semantic, creative component of the text (its capacity to select, manipulate and transmit knowledge) go in tandem with its pragmatic capability to activate readers' ethical response as they compare and contrast their worldview with the world reflected in the text.¹⁸ Lotman's heuristic framework, therefore, came to include a binary composed by a primary and a secondary modelling system, whose interaction would trickle down to provide meaning, language, signs and memory to people's daily life. As early as 1975, Lotman had already proposed a "concentric" image of culture as a composite system, composed of a "centre" – the most prominent and better organized structures – and a "periphery", where all the structures whose semiotic organization is scarce or imprecise, but have a high currency in human activities, and therefore tend to function *according* to semiotic systems' patterns (*Semiotica e cultura* 66).¹⁹ It is precisely the latter systems' lack of a clear-cut order that allows its practical application in human everyday life: as Lotman notes "[...] an incomplete organicity guarantees human culture a superior intrinsic capability and a dynamis that are unknown to more harmonious systems" (*Semiotica e cultura* 66). This elastic feature, the capability (and willingness) to modify its structure in response to a need, combined with the continued

¹⁸ Translator Donatella Ferrari Bravo also stresses the cultural, almost anthropological bent in the assessment of literature developed by the Tartu group. In her introduction to *Semiotica e cultura* ("Semiosis and culture") she states how art is not understood as separate world, but rather as a "sphere" in an of itself whose roots are deeply attached to other spheres, those pertaining to the general functioning of human life (xiii).

¹⁹ Lotman also posits, as a positive feature of living cultures, the tendency to create, in addition to a layered coexistence of high and low registers within the culture, and a specific "extra cultural" domain that is tolerated and acknowledged, but placed at a lower echelon of cultural texts, particular "islands" of culture, whose prestige is high within the culture specifically because of their alien status and intrinsic difference from the "primary" culture system (*Semiotica e cultura* 90). These are temporary points of contact between different cultural worlds providing a welcomed outlet for imagination, transgression, make-believe and other sorts of cultural variations, all furnishing new air and light to an otherwise close (and automated) system. Whenever unitary supporting structures fail or do not exist, however, such exceptions, Lotman clarifies, cannot fully or successfully exist, or even be culturally metabolised as such: central mainstays are essential to any cultural universe.

remembrance of past states, is what provides self-awareness and unity to the culture, and is a dynamic that is especially legible in peripheral instances.

The permeable divisions which Lotman envisaged, however, eventually became insufficient to explain the plethora of signs that fill any individual's everyday, or to account for any item complying or defying conventional semiotic grammar. With the development of his notion "semiosphere" later in his career, Lotman wished to overcome the hierarchy and divisions between the linguistic models he had previously theorised: the semiotic universe he now saw was not made up of single, unambiguous signs, rather, each of them existed, individually, within the semiosphere's homogeneous continuum, itself the result and generative condition at the root of cultural development. In his 1990 book *The Universe of the Mind*, translated into English by Ann Shukman, Lotman advanced an evolution of his language-based approach to culture: the elementary dialogic pattern – addresser, addressee and a connecting channel – needs be enriched by Lotman's original notion of "semiosphere", the "[...] semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" (123), that is, a semiotic space whose experience all speakers must be familiar with before attempting the performance of a semiotic act (i.e. any form of communication). Lotman's working definition hinges on an active understanding of language as more than an epistemological basis, but as a "function", a composite ensemble of positive "semiotic spaces" and their perpetually shifting "boundaries". Lotman's semiosphere functions as a repository of accepted, functional signs and meanings: not everything that exists or might exist is or can live within it as a fact. Moreover, an abstract, yet actively filtering buffer zone exists in order to evaluate, decant and quarantine outsider objects and messages until they become familiar or safe enough for the semiosphere to accept them as their own. Boundaries are responsible for as much the protection of the semiosphere's internal unity, as for its mediation with the outside: as Lotman, notes, they are at the frontier, a filter belonging simultaneously to both the "inside" and the "outside", acting as "a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into 'our' language, it is the place where what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal' [...]" (136-7).

Combinations are endless: hard boundaries may help create semiotic unities, softer ones may sustain a semiotic continuum, or else, a series of boundaries may demarcate an ensemble of semiotic spaces while allowing each their independence as a discrete unit, other boundaries may be open on one end, and fully sealed on the other. Lotman postulates an infinite number of semiospheres: each individual manages their own semiosphere – i.e. their autonomous cerebral storage of the existential experience – and specific semiospheres may pertain to geographical realms, cultural topics and actions or even chronological timeframes. Binaries, once again, are proactive tools in Lotman: outside/inside, alien/familiar, resistance/adjustment are instrumental in his discussion of the cultural semiospheres as living organisms rather than cumulative hierarchies. Dialogue, nevertheless, is the fundamental force that connects the semiotic levels and guarantees the permeability (and mutual influence and inference) between each and every sphere. The proximity of *different* semiospheres inevitably causes contact and exchange in the form of willful cooperation, creolization and even outright contrast. In any case, a form of communication must happen, despite the fact that Lotman posits “dialogue” as the primary element of translation and, therefore, linguistic exchange, hence underlining how the active wish, for both participants, to “overcome the semiotic barrier” (143) is instrumental. “Every culture has a ‘built-in’ mechanism for multiplying its languages [...]” (124) Lotman reminds: plurality is a crucial component as well as an ordering principle behind the “asymmetry” and “binarisms” that ostensibly promote the material evolution and enlargement of cultural codes. Lotman’s fascinating proposal is that the asymmetry found in semiotic universes is based on the material physicality of humans: right/left, top/bottom, “male/female”, “living/dead” are all basic principles whose reach extends well beyond spatiality or bodily awareness into the realm of culture. Semiotization can happen only if contextual conditions allow for the expression of the presence of a body in a place:

The outside world, in which a human being is immersed in order to become culturally significant, is subject to semiotization, i.e. it is divided into the domain of objects which signify, symbolize, indicate something (have meaning), and objects which simply are themselves. (*The Universe of the Mind* 133)

“Heterogeneity” is another key component in *any* semiosphere, which, as a continuum, comprises a range of semiotic codes whose compresence is not hindered, or forcibly regulated, by mutual translatability or, conversely, utter incomprehensibility. The radial, layered organization Lotman imagines for the semiospheres presupposes a smaller center and a larger, sprawling periphery: the osmotic compresence of the two indicates the intrinsic heterogeneity of the semiosphere, which manifests itself in the asynchronicity of its developing parts, which Lotman understands as a form of “asymmetry” regulating the translation and communication between different zones, especially the core and the periphery of the semiosphere. Once again, Lotman resorts to language as a matrix and as a symbol: just like language evolution is slower, and perennially unable to catch up with the appearance and establishment of new “things” in order to describe them before they become obsolete, so does the semiosphere with regards to what it includes, its multiplicity may be faster in some realms than in others. Lotman compares the structure of semiosphere to a museum hall: within a given temporal or spatial section, artifacts, texts and ideas pertaining to different or obsolete semiotic systems are engulfed within further semiotic codes that illustrate and decipher them for the benefit a public whose own behaviour and cultural awareness are shaped by epoch-specific semiotic rules (126).

So across any synchronic section of the semiosphere different languages at different stage of development are in conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages not their own, while the codes to decipher them with may be entirely absent. (*The Universe of the Mind* 126)

Not all codes simultaneously inhabiting a semiosphere work as full-fledged semiotic systems: its organizational language is always accompanied by “[...] partial languages, languages which can serve only certain cultural functions, as well as language-like, half-formed systems which can be bearers of semiosis if they are included in the semiotic context” (128). The compresence, collaboration, evolution and mutual translatability of all these partial semiotic systems all contribute to the achievement, over time, of the “metalinguistic” stage of the semiosphere, that is, when a semiosphere is ready and able to describe itself – usually by means of grammars and law codes –

and creates a fixed “world-picture” of itself (one that is perceived as reality by those who live it, and as a past version of reality by those who will *study* it in the future). While the self-descriptive phase counts as the apex of any semiotic system – since the whole structure acquires a more solid organization, its unity and, consequently, survival, is better preserved – it also marks the beginning of a descending phase. At this stage inner dynamism, flexibility towards incoming diverse information and overall indeterminacy of the system’s working balance decrease, slowing the overall development of the semiosphere. The generation of “texts” (Lotman often employs literary examples, but always specifies the heuristic applicability of his framework) at the core of the semiosphere will therefore create the set of “norms” – the how-to that makes up the hegemony of certain values over others, and sanctions certain conventions over others – whose enforcement in the periphery will clash with the marginal, “incorrect” practices occurring there. Time, and the relentless cultural movement that slowly absorbs and takes over the novelty, the unruliness, the creativity operating at the edge, and turns them into the centre, and into central, hegemonic model and precepts, always mix and overturn the elements of the semiosphere. Any epoch’s transgression can, and will, become another (later) epoch’s neutral convention; any epoch’s set of rules is likely to become its era’s idiosyncratic feature and an example of obsolescence for later societies.

So while on the metalevel the picture is one of semiotic unity, on the level of the semiotic reality which is described by the metalevel, all kinds of other tendencies flourish. While the picture of the upper level is painted in a smooth uniform colour, the lower level is bright with colours and many intersecting boundaries. (*The Universe of the Mind* 130)

The crucial novelty for Lotman here, is the understanding of semiospheres not as merely storing and communicating devices: the creativity sparked by the proximity and influence among the semiospheres is the primary force that Lotman locates as responsible for the generation of new signs, objects and texts. In brief: Lotman’s earlier conception of culture as a linguistic binary of modelling systems whose major (if not sole) role was to safely and quickly transmit clear information from point A to point B, gradually came to be enriched (and possibly superseded) by the notion of culture as a

“thinking machine”, whose semiospheres store and make use of messages and signs, but also combine them *unpredictably* to create new ones and, consequently, new meanings. Lotman also detects two contradictory tendencies in semiospheres as underpinnings of culture: on the one hand, innovation and the inclusion of diversity and novelty from the outside is essential to attain internal combination and richness; on the other, internal solidity and cohesion need be safeguarded as a matter of survival for the entire sphere. The balance between the two forces is, again, recapitulated in a series of binary “antinomies” – such as relevant/redundant, old/new, collective/individual, stasis/dynamism, centre/periphery, unambiguous/ambivalent, described/undescribed, systemic/non-systemic, etcetera – whose complementary coexistence is vital to the semiosphere. Predictable/unpredictable is perhaps the pair Lotman sees as the basic principle regulating the evolution and maintenance of culture, as the effects of predictable, slow changes and the consequences forced by dramatic, unexpected facts (what Lotman terms “explosion”) can only be assessed at later stages, via narrativized historical accounts. The idea of “explosion” serves Lotman’s conception of “unpredictability” well: the unusual, possibly unprecedented, often violent change may surprise and result impossible to explain at first, but eventually, its logic can be retroactively established by means of historical thinking, scientific enquiry, personal narratives and other conceptual actions that, in time, help the novelty sediment and become accepted in the culture.

The semiosphere, the space of culture, is not something that acts according to mapped out and pre-calculated plans. It seethes like the sun, centres of activity boil up in different places, in the depths and on the surface, irradiating relatively peaceful areas with its immense energy. But unlike that of the sun, the energy of the semiosphere is the energy of information, the energy of Thought. (*The Universe of the Mind* 151)

Semiospheres can absorb internal evolutions as well as sudden crises, as well as creating the narratives that serve to provide order, logic and, eventually, meaning. Each of the texts produced culturally, moreover, bear the signs of all the parties that influence them: the author’s structural agency, indeed, but also the layers of audiences’ responses to the text, which are in turn informed by specific historical and contextual

conditionings. Lotman advances the concept of “explosion” in one of his last published works, *Kul'tura i vzryv* (1992), translated into English by Wilma Clark as *Culture and Explosion* in 2004. The diverse range of essays compiled in *Culture and Explosion* summarise the major ideas produced by Lotman throughout his career: the static description of the ideal workings of a semiosphere are, however, completed and enhanced by his reflections about the ways a semiotic system can develop and enlarge itself while simultaneously guarding its unity and cultural specificity. Lotman confirms his vision of the semiosphere as a heterogeneous, multi-levelled continuum whose status cannot remain static and invariant in order to survive. Self-sufficiency is thus considered to be as dangerous a situation as the uncontrolled, potentially destabilising introduction of external input into the semiosphere. Predictable and unpredictable are indicated as the crucial criteria whereby inward and outward flows of information in the semiosphere interact and react. “The moment of explosion is the moment of unpredictability” writes Lotman (*Culture and Explosion* 123), and clarifies that what causes or embodies the “unforeseeable” as a characteristic and as a potentiality, is not to be confused with the “undefined” or the “unlimited”. Rather, Lotman selects “[...] a specific collection of equally probable possibilities from which only one may be realised” (*Culture and Explosion* 123), whose position within the semiosphere is pushed away by the force of the “explosion”. It is the progressive distancing within the semiosphere that allows them to generate semiotic meaning, to “become carriers of semantic difference” (*Culture and Explosion* 123). Explosions are intimately linked with the notion of time and, consequently, history: the “unpredictable situation” (*Culture and Explosion* 125) occurring at the explosive moment is a single event as well as a break that will remain ingrained in the semiosphere’s memory. The explosion will inevitably be assessed and analysed in retrospect by future scholars, whose particular chronological positioning with regards to the causes and consequences of the explosion will alter the account of what happened and why:

Looking from the past into the future, we see the present as a complete collection of a series of equally probable possibilities. When we look into the past, reality acquires the status of fact and we are inclined to see it as the only possible realisation. (*Culture and Explosion* 125)

The process that interests Lotman, however, is rather akin to a historiographical preoccupation:²⁰ any historian's subjective gaze, morals and position is not a hindrance insofar as it tends to describe the past occurrence – knowing already its result – as an inevitability (and not as the casual result of a series of unpredictable, connected variants). Lotman's concern lies within the “[...] tendency to turn back to that which has occurred and to subject it to a “correction” in the memory or in its retelling” (*Culture and Explosion* 126). Any culture, Lotman contends, shows an impelling need to recreate its own past – for psychological and/or ideological reasons – by altering, adjusting or transforming the memory of the past into a reality that fits with what is deemed acceptable. While Lotman takes into consideration the distorted social outcomes of outright lying, deceiving and concealing, his discussion pertains to the realm of narrative adaptation that he had already tackled in his earlier work *The Universe of the Mind*. Ideas about what life in the past was like are customarily inferred from an era's central texts, whose semiotic content is generally understood as the accepted norm:

The world-picture created in this way will be perceived by its contemporaries as reality. Indeed, it will be *their* reality to the extent that they have accepted the laws of that semiotics. And later generations (including scholars), who reconstruct life in those days from texts, will imbibe the idea that everyday reality was indeed like that. But the relationship of this metalevel of the semiosphere to the real picture of its semiotic ‘map’ on the one hand, and to the everyday reality of life on the other, will be complex. (*The Universe of the Mind* 129)

The appraisal of the culture produced at the margin is usually only retrieved when a generation of scholars perceive a gap between their contemporaneous understanding of the semiotic charge enshrined in a certain era and the values they themselves wish to see reflected, or attempt to seek at an earlier stage, beyond a fixed canon, in past

²⁰ In his essay “Metalanguage in Cultural Descriptions” (“Il metalinguaggio delle descrizioni tipologiche della cultura”, written jointly with Boris Uspenskij, in *Tipologia della cultura*, 1975), Lotman notes how the “othering” of any cultural system in scientific enquiries is an inevitable stance: even a comparative approach cannot but posit the researcher's cultural belonging (and perhaps allegiance) as the “neutral”, fixed component, and the “extraneous” system as a different “other”, whose internal organizing binaries, such as “organized/unorganized” are difficult, or even impossible to fully translate (145-147).

times' cultures. The relentless maturation of the semiosphere is also evident in these attempts at self-description via a metalanguage whose vocabulary alters as it describes what came into semiotic existence within the culture: what exists at the periphery will always be drawn to the centre, where its alien energy will, in turn, become a norm, and a neutral reality. The following section will continue to engage with the idea that language is a basic pattern in the semiotic formation of culture, but through the lens of Julia Kristeva's original interest in the subjective and psychological charge embedded in any cultural act.

1.2.3. Subject (Julia Kristeva)

The discovery of Julia Kristeva as a commentator on Bakhtin precedes my reading of Kristeva as a feminist theorist: the texts she produced in the latter part of her career – after her own experience with motherhood and marriage, and the downsizing of her political penchant following the disappointing *Tel Quel* expedition to Maoist China in 1974 – exist as background to much contemporary theory, but suffer from the declining currency of French second-wave thinkers (Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva herself have become somewhat unfashionable references as the centre of the debate has shifted towards the Anglosphere). My distrust, or rather, my unwillingness to engage with texts that would draw heavily from psychoanalysis in order to describe and enforce – I feared – a hypostatic gender difference, prejudiced my meeting with Kristeva, and therefore delayed my reading of her early semiotic work. A fascination for Kristeva's biography also played a role: the publication, in April 2018, of a 400-pages dossier about Kristeva by the Bulgarian Dossier Committee²¹ – whose task is the declassification of Soviet-era state security records – unleashed the gossip that she had been an undercover agent for the Bulgarian intelligence in France during the 1960's and 1970's. Kristeva denied

²¹ Maria Dimitrova's article "A Jar, a Blouse, a Letter" for the *London Review of Books*, published online on the 3rd of April 2018 (URL: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2018/april/a-jar-a-blouse-a-letter>), conveniently summarises the "Kristeva Dossier" affair and provides a contextual overview that meets halfway a spy-fiction fanciful plot and historical likelihood: Kristeva contested communications with her home country's foreign offices – either embassies or intelligence desks – probably were little more than an inescapable bureaucratic necessity she needed to perform in order to be granted permission to live abroad.

the allegations, stating her unwavering opposition to the Soviet regime. Whether Kristeva was a cognisant player operating on both sides of the Iron Curtain, or rather a solitary expat who could not afford to cut all ties with her homeland (or risk the safety of her family who resided there), the uniqueness of her personal path translates into an intellectual trajectory that is equally striking. The following chapter section is informed by my long-standing interest in modes of thinking that engage one's personal marginality as a filtering or magnifying tool: Kristeva idiosyncratic, generative and, simultaneously, disruptive approach to standard semiotic literary analysis displays an aptitude for the ingenious which appears to me as the direct result of a resourceful attitude, possibly one bred in solitary distance from conventional axioms. Kristeva's later production aimed at a generalist as well as academic audience, which was heavily informed by her psychoanalytic training and active practice as analyst, her marginal involvement in feminism – which she addresses as a theory, rather than as political praxis, via essays about Bellini's portrayal of motherhood, the life of Chinese women under Maoist rule, or Kristeva's hopeful and critical identikit of a “dissident” intellectual – will not be dealt with here. Kristeva's early, perhaps more conforming theoretical texts about the excess process imbricated in the making of meaning – her notions of semiotic vs. symbolic also merge into the idea that the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic – seem to be in keeping with this thesis' general preoccupation with the meaningful potential of recurring communicative instances. In her essay “Julia Kristeva – Take Two” (collected in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 1986), Jacqueline Rose reviews the intellectual trajectories in Kristeva's life via her written production and her academic alliances. Rose classifies Kristeva on the onset of her career as a semiotician whose interest in linguistic analysis soon develops in an inalienable concern towards the description and “[...] critique of the stabilising illusion of the sign” (142). Kristeva's early endeavours, Rose suggests, posit dynamism and potential changeability as the core notion in the signifying systems (which she will accordingly re-name “signifying practices”) Kristeva seeks to analyse. Kristeva identifies, at the intersection between any individual's subjective experience of reality – read as a psychic force as well as unconscious feeling – and the seemingly immutable cultural structures weighing differently on each person, the tension that traditional, structuralist-oriented semiotics is unable (or unwilling) to

cover. “Crude grammatology abdicates the subject [...] uninterested in symbolic and social structures, it has nothing to say in the face of their destruction or renewal” (143) Rose quotes from a 1974 paper by Kristeva. “*Sémanalyse*” is Kristeva’s own term for the special streak of semiotic criticism interspersed by psychoanalytic methodologies which she developed as a stand-alone theory and, more generally, as her personal hybrid approach to linguistic analysis. “[...] To confront language at the point where it undoes itself” stresses Rose, became Kristeva’s objective, the combinatory relationship between language and sign would not be sustained as a clear-cut duality, rather, Kristeva would consistently chose to look behind, under, through the linguistic fictions and illusions that sustain the sign symbolism at the base and heart of society as we know it. Rose insightfully summarises Kristeva’s intellectual quest thus:

The question therefore becomes not how to disrupt language by leaving its recognisable forms completely *behind*, but how to articulate the psychic processes which language normally glosses over *on this side* of meaning or sense. (Rose 146)

Kristeva’s subject of choice – the underbelly of culture concealed by linguistic dazzle – is not an attempt to expose reality at its roots, or to “free” the individual from purely symbolic constraints: “For Kristeva, to abdicate symbolic norms – to enact that abdication – opens the way to psychosis [...]” (146) also notes Rose, highlighting the complex influence and modular interplay between cultural overt conventions, subjective psychic action/reaction, and the logical practice of meaning via politics, ideologies, social patterns. The understanding of “significance” as a condition determined, first and foremost, by time and space contingencies, the Structuralist inheritance of ideas such as history as text, culture as non-representational but productive in its epistemology would progressively move out of focus for Kristeva. After the 1974 Chinese disappointment and her decision to undergo psychoanalytic training, to later operate professionally as a psychoanalyst, Kristeva started remodeling her public identity as, foremost, an academic theorist. Her deescalation of the semiotic and political loads backing theoretical discourse remained consistent: her recovery of the local, individual dimension as explored by psychoanalytic approaches informed her idiosyncratic

embrace of feminist theory and the inclusion of elements pertaining to the “feminine” realm into her work.

Kristeva’s positioning is simultaneously receptive of the topical debate occurring in France from the 1970’s onwards and fiercely skeptical of any identity-driven – hence identity-enforcing – theoretical catchphrase. As Toril Moi recapitulates in her introduction to *The Kristeva Reader* (1986), Kristeva’s takeaway from the so-called “question of femininity” is that “[...] as different or other in relation to language and meaning, but nevertheless only thinkable within the symbolic, and therefore also necessarily subject to the Law” (11). The ambiguous distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic – innate mechanisms and cultural images – as pertaining to the feminine is perhaps best exemplified in Kristeva’s original repurposing of the Platonic term *chora* (“receptacle”) as a distinctly Kristevian theoretical concept of subjectivity and its relationship to symbolic/semiotic signification. It appears to me that Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory of infant psychosexual development mirrors her abstract model for semiotic to symbolic signification: rather than existing in a metaphorical relationship that teleologically reads growth patterns into the cognitive body as well as into cultural organisms, Kristevian “evolutionary” theory directly equalizes her psychoanalytic practice and her philosophical speculations. For instance, Kristeva seems likely to take the body into account when schematising the process of creation and acquisition of meaning, as she does with the notion of *chora*: a prelingual stage she situates at the earliest months of a child’s life, during which time the distinction between oneself and one’s mother is unmarked, and the experience of life is one of pleasurable perception and satisfaction of one’s basic material needs. The semiotic *chora* is the non expressive material that results from this liminal state: “[...] a non expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (*The Portable Kristeva* 35), explains Kristeva in the essay “The Semiotic and the Symbolic” – excerpted from her master work *Revolution in Poetic Language* – adding that *chora* is a mobile articulation, whose motions clash against and follow (semiotic) discourse, it is a conceptual space that may be localised, but cannot be firmly defined. The semiotic *chora* echoes the energy moving within a body in the process of becoming a subject, whose final identity, however, cannot but be curbed by the constraints that other forces

– such as family or societal bodies/structures – have already put in place to meet them. This is the regulated aspect proper to the *chora*: its vocal and gestural organisation (which Kristeva calls *ordonnement*) is dictated by natural or socio-historical constraints, such as biological differences between the sexes or family structure. Social organisation, which Kristeva sees as already symbolic, imprints its constraints via a mediated form that organises the *chora* not according to a law, but “through an *ordering*” (*The Portable Kristeva* 36). Overall, either the maternal *chora* and the semiotic *chora* share a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated semiotically, thus exposing the absence of an object, even of the distinction between real and symbolic. As Toril Moi explains it in her introduction, the *chora* lingers “as a rhythmic pulsion” within conscious, social symbolic language, “as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences” (*The Kristeva Reader* 13). Nevertheless, Kristeva’s turn to psychoanalysis remains one of the elements that characterise the latter part of her career, and, primarily inform her overarching focus on “the subject” as the primary ethical unit in the assessment of reality: the literary materiality, on the one hand, which grounds the abstraction of linguistic symbolism and, on the other hand, the psychoanalytic search for a version of personal truth, one that separates ethics from duty on account of one’s desire, which cannot always be politicized, if even accounted for.

Kristeva’s earliest literary research is what interested me for the sake of this thesis, specifically her link with Bakhtinian theories, but also for her supposed rejection of “pure” theoretical application in her practice, which, according to commentators such as Leon S. Roudiez in his introduction to *Desire in Language* (1980), is a stance that Kristeva willfully applies in lieu of blind adherence to theory, “[...] allowing practice to test theory, letting the two enter into dialectical relationship” (1). Kristeva appears to have felt the use of linguistics as a pure science – as she perceived it in the early 1960’s – to be an insufficient tool, by itself, to analyse and understand the semiotic potential of language as either an instrument for literature and a channel of daily communication. Her primogenial realm of interest was indeed the “speaking” component in the linguistic act as a method to create and propagate meaning: Kristeva’s willingness to include the idea that the relationship between signifier and signified may not always, only be

univocal, rather, that it would consistently allow language to work towards meanings *other* than the primary ones, lead her to include the speaker's linguistic agency into account beyond what is simply "said", "spoken", to include what is implicitly "signified". Hence her *sémanalyse* as a critique of meaning and its inner workings, as well as the productive realms it pertains to, the symbolic and the semiotic. I find Kristeva at her clearest about the literary implementations of theoretical "semanalysis" in her essay "How Does One Speak to Literature?" (in *Desire in Language*, 1980), in which she reviews and comments on the philosophical work of Roland Barthes. Her earnest appraisal of Barthes' ideas joins Kristeva's capacity to provide a concise, ordered guidance to the raw quantity of theoretical input scattered in various barthesian titles. Specifically, Kristeva is able to bring her psychoanalytic expertise to the assessment of the supposed binary couple subject/object which she identifies as a crucial underpinning in Barthes' logic. Moreover, her recapitulation is informed, or rather, inspired, by her willingness to also cast "literature", the "literary arts" and "writing" (seen as generative process) as a form of practical knowledge which resists, nonetheless, scientific or technical specialization. Literature is thus understood as occupying a borderline, uncategorizable domain of cultural consciousness, a deposit that fictionalises the actual powers of law, language and societal exchange into a non-material space granting readers the possibility to rehearse, experience somewhat vicariously, those very *real* factors. Kristeva notes how the choice of literature as a medium to understand subjecthood is akin to psychoanalytic frameworks regarding the definition and survival of the self-identifying "I", she writes:

"Literary" and generically "artistic" practice transforms the dependence of the subject on the signifier into a test of its freedom in relation to the signifier and reality. It is a trial where the subject reaches both its limits (the laws of the signifier) and the objective possibilities (linguistic and historic) of their displacement [...]. (*Desire*, 97)

The discursive result enshrined in literary texts, therefore, accounts for the compresence of subjective assertion and socio-historical push, as well as the friction between the two, which emerges into a textual shape "[...] wielding a 'knowledge' that it does not necessarily reflect" (*Desire* 99). The "knowledge" Kristeva is hinting at is a

complex union of historical and ideological materials, either “objective” and subjectively fragmented, which exist as they continuously undermine their own validity. The dialectics Barthes envisages, as perceived by Kristeva, addresses language as a barrier, a boundary separating the subjective and the objective in a way analogous to the separation between the symbolic and the real: while the literary page, on the one hand, evokes a negative space, a location similar to, yet intimately detached from real life and its history, on the other hand is also produces a different, specific “legality”, that establishes, develops sets of rules that are logical and functional within the realm of literature. Kristeva thus appears to affirm Barthes’ theoretical gesture, his overcoming of the boundary between subjective and objective as a functional distinction:

Writing is precisely this “spontaneous motion” that changes the formulation of desire for a signifier into objective law, since the subject of writing, specific like no other, is “in-itself-and-for-itself,” the very place, not of division but, overcoming it, of motion. (*Desire* 117)

Within this dynamic, Kristeva by way of Barthes sketches an epistemological system whereby the “knowing subject” exists in an “analytic relationship to language”, thus activating a continuous reversal of authority and meaningfulness pertaining to the symbolic, forever questioned by the newly awoken subject (*Desire* 121).

The idea of continuous reversal of meaning-making acts and its critical interpellation overlaps with Kristeva’s own development of the theoretical possibilities of literary texts in her essay “From One Identity to An Other” (in *Desire in Language*, 1980), in which she seemingly pushes subjectivity and its linguistic expressive attempts against one another. Again, Kristeva resorts to maternal images – analogous to the motherly *chora* she posited as a semiotic as well as psychological matrix – to orient her linguistic argument: the symbolic stage of language acquisition and development necessarily follows a maternal semiotic introduction to meaning-making. The necessary grammaticality of symbolic realms, therefore, cannot produce signification without the contribution of semiotic, pre-symbolic relations between elements that will later be subject to lawful order, linguistic logic and ideological sense-making. Kristeva’s concern for the necessary sufferance and struggle that individual subjectivity undergoes in order

to survive into a symbolically regulated world remains unsolved: which strategies individuals and, conversely, signifying systems utilise in order to tame and/or adapt to semiotic necessities embedded into symbolic signs is a marginal topic of Kristeva's research. The next chapter section will, however, follow the pioneering path of Stuart Hall, who, as a postcolonial thinker displaced in the UK, was acutely aware of the influence a symbolic structures such as power distribution, geographic location and economical situation could, by means of their very material force, define the semiotics of individual human lives and the literature they could produce.

1.2.4. Context (Stuart Hall)

The transcript of a conference paper Stuart Hall gave at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1990 – “Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future” was the name of the event – reads like a performance of anxious summing up. “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies”, as it has been anthologized (*Essential Essays* 2019) reviews two decades of research and output conducted according to the cultural studies methodology – as developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies – and, in particular Hall's own austere appraisal of his specific contributions and lessons learned. A sense of inadequacy, at times verging on a concern for near failure, permeates the text: Hall feels called to defend the discipline while critiquing it, and the paradox reaches its paradox when the topic of displacement is addressed, simultaneously a stance that Hall understands as the philosophical grounding of his own approach, and the unsatisfactory, unverifiable result/methodology that might undermine the whole endeavour altogether. The elusive character of cultural productions that Hall, and the field he helped to establish, posited as a valid source and locus of meaning (and instance of power) is also – always, Hall suggests in hindsight – “an area of displacement”, “something decentered” (81). The necessary recourse to textuality and language as metaphor, as material, structuring grid for the analysis of culture, that proved indispensable in the early theoretical stages, must now confront with the fleeting nature of the very objects the cultural theoretician desires to scrutinise, especially when they attempt a linkage, a pinning down to other meaningful structures. “The metaphor of the discursive, of textuality, instantiates a necessary delay, a displacement, which I think

is always implied in the concept of culture” advances Hall (81). That culture – “as a medium”, Hall clarifies (81) – cannot be fully, conclusively described. On the contrary, it destabilises and fractionates the position of the onlooking subject, forcing them into a delayed relationship to the object, whose signification is ever changing, engaged into a process of “infinite semiosis” (81).

Hall also applies the notion of open-endedness to the analytic practice as well as to its research subject: the fact that virtually *everything* classifies as potential case study comes in tandem with the functional, and arbitrary, boundary of agency, either individual or social. That is, the political, generative, disruptive effect and/or intent of the research which – as I understand it – equals, for Hall, to the acknowledgement of the researcher’s own position within and with regards to their object of study. “It’s a question of positionalities” states Hall (73): the engagement towards the betterment of the real is paramount to the practitioner of Cultural Studies, hence the reiterated focus on secular “worldliness”, the prime role of political intentions, the reckoning with “the dirtiness of the semiotic game” (Hall 73). The deterministic orthodoxy of theoretical models interests Hall only as long as it is possible to overturn, overrun, recompose those systems as something other than distant frameworks, a process he suggests we call “wrestling with the angels” (75): the immanent part as weightless as it feels, at times, elusive, and frustrating to interact with. “The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency”, is Hall’s suggestion (75), which he later integrates with another luminous observation: “There’s another metaphor for theoretical work: theoretical work as interruption” (78). The aseptic treatment of theory via its privileged outlet of recognition and exercise – linguistic textuality as a meaning-making tool – needs be updated by accepting the triangulation among material, political power (including its adversary forces: resistance, disaffiliation, countercultural production, etc.), what exists as public domain, and the ongoing negotiations of boundaries between an individual’s unconscious existence and the social readings of gender and sexuality. The “something nasty down below” is what Hall hints as a counterpart to the neatness of theory (74). The intellectual work that interrupts the unmarked flow of power via the naturalisation of the aforementioned is the work Hall is interested in accomplishing, despite the awareness that the push towards

signification, grouping, linking and cross-disciplinary comparison is as inevitable as it ultimately unattainable. The discourses of culture are mutant, and forever swifter than the analytic gaze pursuing them.

In a 1997 interview with David Scott (originally published in the first issue of the magazine *Small Axe*, and anthologized as “Politics, Contingency, Strategy: An Interview with David Scott” in *Essential Essays*), Stuart Hall discusses retrospectively, again, the purpose and development of Cultural Studies less as an academic field, or a communal project, than as an intellectual wholeness, a mode to approach observation, study, the organization and disclosure of information as an organic philosophical and ethical enterprise. Scott identifies the centrality of strategy in Hall’s approach, whereby “contingency and conjuncture” (235) are methods as well as subjects of inquiry, evolving and changing (in their scope and definition) according to the historical moment their reading is carried out in, and responsive to the “cognitive-political configuration” (235) they activate. During their discussion about the creation and development of Cultural Studies – which Scott posits as an academic approach whose distinguishing feature is the inclusion, within the interests of the humanities, “nonelite or ‘popular’” (275) cultural forms and products – Hall dwells on the shaping concepts that informed his early theoretical writings (the popular media body of texts published throughout the 1960’s and 70’s) and, most importantly, on his own appropriation and repurposing of those very same ideas. Ideology, as received via Marxist thought and connected, most importantly, with Gramscian theory of “hegemony”,²² thus becomes instrumental to the observation

²² Hall’s notion of ideology echoes Barthesian concerns about the power of myths as virtually synonymous with ideology, and is notably critical of Marxist standard top-down conception of ideology as a willful imposition enacted by one class upon subaltern ones. Mostly, Hall seems to channel Althusserian observations about ideological state apparatuses which govern individuals and groups in capitalist societies. The innovation of Hall’s approach, furthermore, builds on a seemingly linguistic approach, whereby the ideology reproduced by said institutions is essentially discursive in nature. Hall’s original contribution, moreover, levers the understanding of cultural ideology with the analysis of its distributive and reproductive channels, the media. Nevertheless, while reworking Althusserian assumptions concerning the internalisation of ideology as the best and, perhaps, only method to reproduce and sustain capitalist values, Hall challenges it and advances a more nuanced outlook: one including the possibility of subversive responses to the master narratives endorsed by institutional power, and which acknowledges the friction, even struggle, between contemporaneous competing ideologies. Hall sees hegemony as a

of culture, rather than the other way round. Hall posits meaning as a discursive process that operates within a language-based system, through a set of codes loaded with ideological signification. The instance at stake is not, however, as much concerned with the relationship within the realms of material existence, as it prioritises an “ideology in everyday life, ideology in popular culture, ideology in mass communication, etc.” (248), it ultimately identifies the “ideological element” (248) in the object under scrutiny which, in itself, needs to remain material, not become a symbol, or a cypher for any theoretical undercurrent.

Culture, in Hall’s notion,²³ is rather a primary force: it is the way whereby people make sense of, and give meaning to things. Hall acknowledges, crucially, that each human individual has their own conceptual world, or at least, a personal take on the conceptual world. However, in order to experience the world *socially*, to allow it to become communicable, each person, and each group, needs to understand, accept and, consequently, build on a map of ideas and intelligible meanings that are shared and acknowledged by one’s fellow people. It is by means of these shared “maps” that those sharing the same culture are grouped together as a meaningful social group. While the capacity to use concepts and to classify them is a biological and genetic capability, cultural and social classification is also something learned, not (only) in a formal didactic setting, but rather, it is a process of internalisation, proximity and contiguity with fellow social beings. Those who become proficient at sensing and performing cultural cues exist as “cultural subjects” rather than mere biological individuals, since they have successfully assimilated within themselves their cultural grid of belonging. Social and

transactional form of power: oppositional politics and voices are allowed to be present and participate in media discourse, but the role of institutional media is also to suppress dissent by soliciting support from all parts of a society via influence. Since media exist as a function of the existing social context, they are likely to, even unwittingly, participate, condone and reproduce the “preferred messages” of institutional power. As Hall notes, “the professional code operates within the hegemony of the dominant code” (272).

²³ As developed across numerous works, such as essays “Encoding and Decoding in the television Discourse” (1973) – which will be discussed later –, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect’” (1977), “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’” (1981), and books such as *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997).

cultural value is generally (and organically) ascribed to objects and ideas whose representation is intelligible to and shareable by large portions of the population: these ideas form and conjoin continuously within a mutually accepted idea of the world, even a world that people merely happen to be born in. Furthermore, the social currency of ideas and communal meaning-making tends to spread according to binary criteria: what “belongs together”, and what is “different from/than”. Alongside the materiality of objects, language and everyday social vocabulary, Hall places the representative system of those same elements: culture works also as a representation system, a conceptual repository allowing individuals to store, refer to and think about objects that are no longer accessible to one’s immediate senses at the time of speaking, yet feel real because there exists a language to describe them.

Hall also links to cultural repositories what he terms “practices of signification”: acts, processes and practices that actively *produce* meaning, either new or repurposed, via symbolic work, thus arguing for the changeable nature of the cultural world and the ways employed to communicate it. Personal talk, private communication, non-verbal exchanges saturate the cultural world, but it is communication via technologically-enabled media – Hall focuses his research on TV and printed media, but the category includes, and is not limited to, cinema, music, radio, internet – that has come to be the most widely circulated signifying practice. As institutional systems gradually attain the same status of face-to-face communication, and manage to replace oral information, Hall warns, it is necessary to recognise and tackle the question of power embedded in the meaning-making capability of media: who owns, controls and creates the meanings which are then circulated among people, and eventually accepted, and assimilated as truths. The standard interpretation of the role of media, according to Hall, is that the representation they provide is but the depiction of something else, whereby something *is* already and is only later re-presented, pictured by and in the media. Hall’s contention with this idea is developed in a notion of representation as the gap between the object and its represented image. At the heart of Hall’s argument is the suspicious dismissal of the idea that anything, from people, to events to fact, to objects and animals, can only possess a singular inner meaning, against which it is possible to measure the level of distortion that they are subjected to via the representing mechanism. On the contrary,

Hall suggests that not only meanings are likely multiple, and impossible to securely pin down, but also that the signifying flow is propelled by representation itself, not by the subject/object itself. Representation is thus understood as constitutive: not a retrospect effect, a reaction to meaningful events, but a generative gaze that endows events and objects with significance, even the very existence, *because* they are represented by the media. Representation, therefore, sets the conditions of existence and, consequently, of non-existence when events, people and social truths are ignored or excluded by mediated narratives.

Hall's career-long interest for media discourses accompanies his dedication to studying, and raising as worthy subjects, the myriad forms of cultural resistance, rejection and negotiations with official and master narratives carried out by pockets of minority spectators²⁴ within the mass audiences posited by the official mediascapes. Hall

²⁴ Hall notably expands his discussion about active and resisting audiences to include the discourse of racialization within a postcolonial framework: he does so in book-length works such as *Resistance Through Rituals, Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (written with Tony Jefferson in 1976), and in collected essays such as "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" (1992), "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities" (1991), "The Multicultural Question" (2000), "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980) and, most importantly for the development of his philosophical trajectory, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" (1986).

Hall argues against the biological interpretation of racial difference, and demands we pay close attention to the (cultural) processes by which differences of appearances, opposing phenotypes and geolocal specificities come to stand in for "natural" or "biological" properties of human beings. Race, therefore, is demonstrably a "discursive construct", whose meaning, much like any other aspect of cultural capitals, is never fixed, hence the term "floating signifier". Race, Hall contends, is more akin to a language in its workings: skin colour as a meaning is relational, ever changing. As a signifier, and as discourse, it is an empty sign, whose inner nature remains unfixed, its meaning(s) cannot be established securely: it floats on top of a body of water whose undertows are power struggles and relational distinctions.

Its very material counterpart, however, is rooted in the long-standing, established violence of human history: the humanist study of the characters and effects of race on people should forgo the biological and genetical components, and rather employ a socio-cultural, historical framework of reference. Hall's concept of "floating signifier" sprouts from his thinking about race as a social construct, yet, as I understand it, is able to successfully work across thematics beyond the notion of race. The potentialities of the "floating" component of the concept are fascinating: that any signifier could become a floating item, unattached to any unchangeable meaning, appears as a notable underpinning to the appraisal of cultural

challenges the notion that the message embedded in communicative acts is, foremost, a unitary item, endowed by its originator with a set meaning. The consequential effect of this model is that a message delivered to an audience that misunderstands it, or interprets it in a way other than what was originally expected signals the failure of the implemented communication chain. A similar framework implies that messages are assumed to be immune to bias, deformation, distortion and, most importantly, that they are expected to be universally transferable, hence, understandable. Existing economic and social structures tend, unfortunately, to remain unacknowledged as potential distortions to the intended message. By rejecting the referential notion of language – whereby meaning is assured by the strong bond between signifier and meaning – Hall creates space for a descriptive approach that links language with symbolisation and equates them in the formation of signifying practices.

Hall applies the semiotic pattern of meaning construction to his particular model of media production *and* reception, the “encoding/decoding” model of communication, which he presents in his 1973 paper “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” (*Essential Essays* 257). Media institutions play a considerable role in providing sense-making tools to shape the world: in Hall’s theory, language is first encoded by media-makers – who master and own the necessary infrastructure – in visual, linguistic forms that make it *mean* something, while at the receiving end of the system it is later decoded by audiences in ways that similarly process, extract meaning from the transferred information. The “encoding” side of the model pertains to the pragmatic actions undertaken by professional figures working within media codes, which include, and are not limited to, technical competencies (such as camera operations), professional equipment, budget management, editing choices and editorial selections (such as musical arrangements, talent casting, etc.). In the case of journalistic reportage, moreover, the ideology of professionalism is especially pronounced: how and what news stories are selected, in which order of importance they are placed, all construe the idea of “newsworthiness” according to individual news

products (both in and outside the mainstream, the orthodoxy, the canon). A notion, moreover, that is likely rooted in Hall’s foundational notion of the “dirtiness” of semiosis, whose scope cannot be limited to the textual and linguistic clarity.

outlets, which does not obey objective criteria. While it does attempt to exert its preferred meaning upon audiences, the “encoding” process behind it is highly subjective. The combination of these factors – rules, codes and values – generate a “preferred meaning”, that is, the ideological meaning as sanctioned by the commissioning institutions, and contribute, overall, to the reproduction and spreading of a specific ideological construction of meanings (and thus, in Hall’s understanding, set up the role of TV as a primary myth-making device).

The “message” thus concocted is presented as the privileged option for meaning, but cannot in any way exist as the mandatory default once the media product is released publicly. Asymmetry is, therefore, a crucial component in Hall’s model: the binary created by the encoding and the decoding sections are susceptible to interference and misreading. A chronological sensitivity seems at play in Hall’s model: in a previous, determinate moment, the structure employs and manipulates a code so as to cause it to yield a set message, in a later, also determinate moment, the message, as filtered by audience decodings, issues its meanings as signification in a pragmatic social context. Since encoding and decoding are distinct, determinate moments, the signifying structure of media production does not reflect reality in an objective sense. Rather, in the case, for instance, of TV messages, meaning can only be attained by abiding with the conventions of the audio-visual medium in general, and of the television discourse in particular. Hence, Hall observes, the image on the television screen can only signify the experience it *portrays*, it is unable to convey the experience of the event as *itself*.

“Decoding”, on the other hand, is presented by Hall as a three-fold process of sense-making, each of them a possible reaction from the receiving audience to the media messages they are presented with. First, Hall theorises a “dominant code” of decoding, whereby the viewer accepts, and perhaps agrees and even actively echoes the preferred meaning as intended and packaged by the professional encoders. Next, Hall presents a “negotiating code”, the more malleable, perhaps, of the decoding approaches, since it includes any reaction, on the audience’s side, that accepts *some* meanings among the preferred ones – because they are understood, or even endorsed – but opposes, or outright rejects others, which may not confirm or comply with one’s experience and beliefs. Lastly, Hall posits an “oppositional code” whereby some

members in the audience disagree in full with the proposed statement, on either a general and local level, thus rejecting the proposed meaning altogether.

Hall, however, clarifies that the connotative polysemy enabled by the intrinsic openness of denotative codes developed by media does not result into plurality: despite the variety of knowledge, readings, information concerning cultural topics, the hierarchical distribution of such “mappings”, as Hall terms them, is to be expected. “We say ‘dominant’, not ‘determined’, because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event within more than one ‘mapping’” (269), Hall suggests as an entryway to his argument about the ideological core imprinted in institutional media infrastructure. While, on a purely abstract level, the binary semiosis at play between the functional denotative and the signifying connotative feels clear-cut, in real-life terms, Hall stresses, requires a case-to-case assessment of what the audience’s “misunderstandings” could look like and, above all, mean. It is necessary to take into consideration the presence and effects of the norms of everyday life interaction, the economic situation in a certain historical segment, the political powers enacting in the background, and this assessment needs to be inferred “*through* the codes” (270), including the performative enactment of the same, which are in turn subject to (subjective) logics and affects fluctuating towards one’s preferred, or enforceable “meanings-set” (270). By highlighting how any mediated discourse comes loaded with independent variables (autonomous to the individual level), Hall challenges the applicability of the term “misunderstanding” to the decoding undertaken by audiences. Readings that do not conform with the intended meaning should not be discarded as “individually ‘aberrant’ readings, attributed to ‘selective perception’” (Hall 271), rather, that should be treated as clues regarding the subcultural vocabularies and socio-political positionalities at play. The negotiation processes occurring when the gap between utterance and experience persists calls in for:

[...] particular or situated logics: and these logics arise from the differentiated position of those who occupy this position in the spectrum, and from their differential and unequal relation to power. (273)

Subjectivity, therefore, as a form of responsibility towards the messages received from authorities sources, shields, responds and appropriates media productions in ways that evoke and signal one's particular life and cultural experience as an active participatory motion. "To 'misread' a political choice as a technical one represents a type of unconscious collusion with the dominant interests [...]" (275) Hall remarks, and does not shy away from labelling this approach as mystification, a strategy apt to the reproduction of hegemonic values, whose diffusion, he implies, occurs regardless of the crispness of the TV signal. The malleability of Hall's model motivates my own approach to understanding mediated narratives in a way that is flexible enough to recognise and concede the influence, on one's critical output, not only of the original authorial intention, but also the impact of contingent variables, including the experience and sensibility of the critic as a member of a larger audience.

The following, and concluding section of this chapter will address the notion of adaptation as an instance of narrative migration across media. Theoretical approaches that underline features of intermedia adaptations positing the act as an inherently creative intervention will be privileged over comparative approaches to the subject matter. Adaptations seems especially apt to prioritise subjective understanding, i.e. the active *reaction* of the person receiving the original story and therefore *participating* in the reiterating adaptive format. A stance that, as will be discussed, involves makers as well as popular and critical audiences, hence creating a prismatic experience of shared narrativization on top of unidirectional sense-making practices.

1.3. Adaptations: Retelling, Recreating

The easy availability of "adaptations" – as material for commercial entertainment, artistic expression, educational popularization and so forth – seems to go on par with a series of superficially straightforward critical principles, whose value is as widespread as the products they allegedly (albeit often satisfactorily) help scrutinize. These are ideas concerning the hierarchical direction that unites source and adaptation, the latter's fidelity in its treatment of the "original" subject matter, the axiomatic cliché "the book was better", the commonplace indignant reaction to perceived miss-casting, mis-readings or

“heretical” representations of a beloved “source”. That such vernacular criteria appear especially rooted in the evaluation of book-to-film adaptations, rather than in, for instance, videogame franchises, merchandising inspired by children’s cartoons, musical renditions of popular storylines, is not lost to prominent adaptation theoreticians (such as Linda Hutcheon, whose seminal work *A Theory of Adaptation* will be discussed later on in this chapter section). The dual assessment, often carried out in comparative terms, between a literary source and its filmic adaptation is a staple of the academic branch of criticism, as well as a popular pedagogical tool in education, research and dissemination alike, alternatively adopting or dismissing “fidelity” as a useful parameter. I came to this research with the firm conviction that adaptation as an artistic and/or expressive form should be granted full independence, and be evaluated on its own, medium-specific terms – hence rejecting the “hierarchical comparison” device – and maintain this view throughout it. I mostly find myself in agreement with critical stances attempting to overcome the parallel cataloguing of similarities versus poetic licenses between source and adaptation (which are majorly expressed in active critical assessment of case studies rather than expounded in theory texts) in order to assess the quality of the authorial reading, rather than the adaptation’s derivative, mirroring act. When it came to search for ways to expand my own critical toolbox in order to approach the dual study of literary and filmic objects – that is, to find examples of analytical studies whose choice of subject, evaluative gestures, implementation of descriptive language would provide alternative, or new ideas about how to read –, I struggled to find enough theory that could counter, or innovate the plotline-oriented comparative approach, or add complexity to the “fidelity”, or “truthfulness”, or “analogy” debate(s). I hoped to find more structured guidelines that would acknowledge and engage directly with the commingling of takes, information, images and meanings that exists in average audiences’ cultural consciousness. A cultural repository which is in itself a result of the layering and migration of narrative data through the historical reiteration of the same titles, characters and plot lines across multimedia formats. Adaptations appear to have a retroactive, as well as a recursive potentiality over their sources, and the constellation of similar, but often conflicting imaginings of the same original objects co-exist in culture, and foster personal, vernacular, as well as analytic takes which, in turn, influence the

survival and effect of those same objects as meaningful cultural and sentimental instruments. Reading reviews and introductions to collected essay volumes about the state of adaptation studies as an academic field, moreover, confirmed my impression that the discourse is at a stagnant phase, its precarious dependency to adjacent “fully formed” fields, such as literary studies and visual media studies, a further hindrance to its reliability as an engine for original thought.

My primary interest was to follow, possibly to understand, what I see as three directions that already existing narrative lines (as plots, as character-centric acts, as iconographic repositories, as travelling thematic isotopies) can take when undergoing a retelling via an adaptation to a new medium: saying new, saying anew, and telling back. The viability of “saying new” for adaptations hinges on the development of narrative segments in ways that foster new responses, and enhance the authorial function as a generative propulsion for new meanings. The echoing or choral participation in repeating a narrative or thematic refrain pertains to adaptations that “say anew”, thus corroborating and reiterating the long-lasting, and long-established, orthodox (or most beloved) interpretation of the source material, often providing a soothing, reassuring cultural effect. Lastly, the narrative vector I find the most challenging (yet rewarding) to identify and describe, involves inter-media narratives that “tell back” their content or formal shape by creating a response that actively rescasts, repurposes, de-centralises, or even imagines previously unaddressed sections, parts, characters, themes in the master narrative, thus destabilising the conventional significance of the storyline and, along with it, contributing to re-assess the original source. The challenging aspect of this specific mode of re-telling via adaptation is, arguably, embedded in the high degree of authorial responsibility that conceptualises and organises the new responsive take of the familiar material: this is the main reason behind my choice of case studies for this project, as the idiosyncratic features that set each adaptation apart are closely linked to the director’s stylistic and narrative choices, and could not be analysed but in a context that acknowledges authorial agency as well as contextual cultural networks. Given the scarcity of theoretical parameters orienting critical analysis beyond comparison, field-specific strategies and the description of formal imitation/translation between related works (criticism borrowing from ekphrastic texts, in the vein of the principle “*ut*

pictura poesis”), I relied on the praxis inferrable from example-based research to draft my own: a fairly conventional mix of comparative exposition and field-specific discussion of literary/cinematic devices in context. The insight I hoped to encounter in scholarly criticism rarely satisfied my doubts regarding the semiotic proximity and material independence of works existing in a web in hypertextuality around a supposed hypotext, so much so that my literature review left me wondering whether a non-comparative approach to reading film with literature is at all imaginable, let alone feasible. A series of minor remarks – generally expressed as tentative proposals in review papers, or iterations on other thinker’s ideas in research articles, or as working definitions within a larger discussion – have, however, inspired and informed my approach to writing about adaptation practices in a way that is at once critical and, hopefully, analytical.

A serendipitous read, David T. Johnson’s essay-review “The ‘Flashing Glimpse’ of Cinephilia: What an Unusual Methodology Might Offer Adaptation Studies” (2012), has, perhaps, provided me with the clearest assessment of the state of the art I could hope for, besides pointing towards critical directions I could not envisage on my own, or out of standard critical texts. Johnson’s Case for the retrieval of “cinephilia” as a critical lens (if not a paradigm) in adaptation studies emerges out of his appraisal of the field itself, whose purported interdisciplinarity bears the burden of the vagueness that comes from adjacency: halfway between literary and cinematic media studies, the study of adaptation(s) aims to satisfy both disciplines, but its output seldom fits either criteria fully. The affect that Johnson identifies as “cinephilia” is discussed in a triangular relation with the cinematic subject and the verbal, written counterpart it either originates from (the source of the adaptation) or stimulates (the derivative writing shaped in a review, essay, or research paper form). Specifically, Johnson accents the non-rational, fleeting realization over the sedimentary philosophical rumination regarding a piece of cinematic work. According to Johnson, cinephilia arises from:

[...] the encounter with a brief, incidental moment within a given film that exerts an irrational hold on the viewer, one that need not be immediately dismissed as irrelevant but, on the contrary, is charged with a significance not immediately definable or reducible, an enigmatic quality that might lead to writing itself. (27)

Johnson – he is the first to acknowledge it – is in fact advocating for “creative criticism” (27), which he posits as, perhaps, a useful tool against excessive or rigid dogmatism in academic thinking. Sustained dismissal and attacks on the ground of the intrinsic provincialism and insularity of adaptation studies, in addition to its scant methodological toolbox (few iterations beyond the compare-contrast framework) should encourage a shift towards tones and attitudes that seriously account for the subjective, “affective proximity” (Johnson 32) as an evaluative strategy, in addition to conventional critical distancing. “The cinephilic encounter thus expands her imagination’s interaction with historical reality rather than walling itself off from it” (33) Johnson argues, and the “two-way street” relationship between observed object and observing subject, expressive forms and critical forms provides a pleasant (I believe) push to the boundaries of appreciation and orthodoxy. The retrieval of “memory” as a subjective act and its exposure as a meaningful experience beyond the singular, moreover, seems to overlap with the chronological layers that make up most of book-to-film adaptations: the quasi-adhesive proximity between time of writing, time narrated, time of adaptation, time of watching/reading creates an interdependence of meaning and influence that cannot be ignored, and cannot certainly be fully exhausted via compare-contrast approaches. The “haunting” quality of cinematic images that Johnson alludes to in his essay (35) comes close to the movement I hope to chart when analysing novels and films side by side: the unremitting mirroring of details that, on the one hand, contextualise, corroborate, support the gist of the adaptation as a trustworthy iteration, but, on the other hand, create idiosyncratic renditions of the purported “fictional reality” of the adapted work. That such inventions could work primarily as cultural signposts of the zeitgeist that produced them, largely motivates my interest in adaptations as rehearsals of well-known narratives, iterations of other, previous adaptations, whose working gestures are often in keeping with the oral reputation popular with audiences, rather than a strict revision of the source.

Belén Vidal’s scattering of the word “gesture” throughout her 2012 book *Figuring the Past. Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* especially caught my eye for its versatility: Vidal seems to identify as “gesture” any marked decision within the adapted filmic text that stimulates a responsive recognition on the audience’s part. Given her

focus on the “mannerist” character of period productions – the centrality of the story’s “pastness” as a visual device and narrative conceit – Vidal employs the idea of “cultural gesture” (70) as any expedient that motivates narrativization of an obsolete past within an ideological framework that ascribes to different socio-cultural codes. The “gesture” is, therefore, a performative component that brings attention, simultaneously, to the pastness of the subject matter, and to the contemporary, fictional storytelling framing that constructs and provides the final “filmic” object. It is an elusive concept, which complicates the notions of “authenticity” and, consequently, “fidelity”. It strives for mimetic proficiency while, simultaneously, it *de facto* undermines it by singling out the fictionality of the whole endeavour, thus further highlighting the time lapse between the subject matter and the time the receiving audiences are living. In her discussion, Vidal uses “gesture” to convey, for instance, the necessary effort that period films undertake to achieve the effect of realism “[...] through the resuscitation of old forms, and the gestures of reinterpretation that convert form into a viable idiom” (33). Also, to explain how contemporary period films cannot but imbue their narratives with their own time’s anxieties and preoccupations – “[...] the interpretative gestures that transform the past into a mirror of persistent fantasies” (136). Moreover, Vidal argues, the interpretative action that is suggested to, or even expected from viewing audiences, grants in itself extra-cinematic space for “the anachronistic gesture of re-writing” (202). This enables the adaptation to exist at the same time as a reflector of the (imagined) past it portrays, and as a chronological device channelling its own ideas about changing attitudes in time. Eventually, “these films subordinate attentive historical reconstruction to a variety of reading gestures [...]” (126). Every aspect of the adaptation can, ostensibly, absolve the role of “cultural gesture”, from dialogical stances to *mise-en-scène* details: “Teacups, books and cigarettes signpost the relationships between characters and are wielded in significant gestures” (104), Vidal further remarks. The visual veracity of film adaptations, nevertheless, can help build the status of the adaptation as a copy, define its intentions as homage, assess its historical fidelity and proficiency, but can hardly account for what makes adaptation particular as a form in and of itself. The reification of atmospheric detail is too often mistaken for successfully treated fidelity in the hierarchical context of

source-to-adaptation transition, and the care of material details is certainly a major magnet for audiences' attention.

Ursula Vooght's essay "Rescuing Fidelity? Alain Badiou's Truth Event and Four Adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*" (2018), for instance, challenges while attempting to innovate the morally charged concept of "fidelity" in adaptation theory via Badiou's notions of fidelity: an instrumental process towards truth, which is in itself situational and ongoing. Critical jargon such as "rhizomatic network", "intertextuality", "integrated system of referents" are versatile terms that can be applied, Vooght argues, to any text, and do not necessarily draw any guidelines specific to adaptations, rather, most interestingly, the focus on expansive modes of distribution might reiterate a paradigm that accentuates the value of mobility and translatability over specificity and contained pertinence (21). Restoring fidelity as an evaluative criteria, however, would not lead towards the mere assessment of verisimilitude in connection with interpolation, or ever straightforward transmutation from one text to another. Via Badiou's concept of "truth event", Vooght argues for a notion of fidelity as "the process through which truths are accessed" (22), whereby the encounter with new material presupposes an active role: "for Badiou, approaching a text with a fixed idea of its meaning is therefore problematic, despite his assertion that truths are universal", she notes (22). To experience an event, a text, as truth, it is crucial to discard previous mental modes in order to accept and to "move within the situation" as it presents itself, Vooght quotes from Badiou (22). The dynamism that other theories ascribe to the mutation and migration of textual components from a source to an adaptation, to an adapted adaptation, Vooght posits, could similarly be applied to the subjective experience of the creator, the reader, the viewer. This will necessarily include their context of fruition/creation alongside the subject matter of the work. Vooght claims:

To experience text as a truth event, then, still requires activity. Past truths are accessible but only through a dynamic relationship in the present. Thus it could be argued that this truth would continue to happen alongside the text, by means of a fidelity to the reaction the book engenders, as long as other conditions or the historical moment allows. (23)

Novelty – in either content or treatment – seems to be the key component in the experience of the text as truth, argues Vooght via Bourdieu, as well as in the making/watching of an adaptation that simultaneously creates its own truth while preserving the link to its original source. Fidelity needs to relate to “an experience of truth” (Vooght 31), not to the subject matter under scrutiny. Whether one is to accept this call for expansive agency – an almost distributive model of involvement – one is also required to acknowledge the practical implications of reactive participation, not just passive attendance, on the audiences’ part.

If truth-conditions are to be established on the basis of active response to the work presented, then contemporary audiences, with their amateur digital mash-ups, fan-fictions, unauthorised spin-offs and appetite for transmedia franchises are indeed the vocal and creative public that reacts to the narratives they are fed. Siobhan O’Flynn’s epilogue, in coda to the second edition of Linda Hutcheon’s seminal *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) supplies the earlier conclusion of the work – that adaptations are such when they are created “in continuum” with other works, and deliberately posit themselves as “(re-)interpretations and (re-)creations” (172) of previous, recognizable narratives²⁵ – with a much-needed methodological expansion. O’Flynn, in fact, tackles the emergence of user-generated content enabled by the grassroots availability of digital instruments and related skills. While Hutcheon is sceptical of what she terms “‘palimpsestuousness’ of the experience” (172), that is, the public’s enjoyment of narratives via appropriation and modification, O’Flynn resumes the discussion with a more welcoming approach towards vernacular proto- and para-adaptations enabled by cheap editing programs, pirate peer-to-peer file sharing and memetic diffusion on (free-of-charge) social media platforms. O’Flynn provides a working framework to understand the scattered presence of identifiable components belonging to the same, original work:

²⁵ Hutcheon lists as viable forms of adaptation, among others, recreations, remakes, remediations, revisions, parodies, reinventions, reinterpretations, expansions and extensions. The fundamental criteria in her “continuum model” (Hutcheon 172) that set apart a true adaptation are the “extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art” (170).

A transmedia production exists across multiple platforms and discrete components understood together comprise an integrated, interconnected narrative whole, though they are encountered separately. (Hutcheon 181)

Most importantly, O'Flynn quickly addresses the fact that behind the success and reiteration of transmedia adaptations is the easy prospect of endlessly monetizable content, whereby the same basic components are translated and reproduced across as many media as possible, as long as their legal copyright owners profit from this repurposing, and are in full control of their administration. Market logics might endorse the recycling and upcycling of narrative commodities from one media to another, foster and welcome audience response within an ostensibly "multi-channel networked exchange" (187), but patented authority over the content's usage (and the stream of revenue it originates) is unlikely to approve of a theoretical model such as Hutchinson's (and O'Flynn's), which understands adaptation as an expansive "system of diffusion", a web of relations among different works. While, intellectually, adaptation may be defined as an intangible process, in business terms "adaptation" is a safe investment, a product first and foremost, whose major quality is the aura of familiarity that is sure to attract faithful audiences. A failsafe system that rewards lengthy right-acquisition optioning with (almost) guaranteed profits. Those very purchasable legal rights are ostensibly threatened by the crowdsourced cultural commons of online communities, whose love for the stories and their characters is often branded as stronger a bond than copyright and authorial ownership exercised by entertainment corporations. Yet, O'Flynn specifies, actual menace to ownership is unlikely. Indeed, the extranational porousness of internet fandoms disrupts traditional models of distribution, but the industry's reaction will undoubtedly lead to operational and conceptual strategies that will successfully harness the enormous amount of sheer, free creativity into yet another monetizable gain for the industry itself. The digital innovation is, ultimately, a new chapter in methodological development, but it ultimately confirms Hutcheon's definition of adaptations as practices driven by repetition and variation on a virtually unending scale.

Clare Parody's essay "Franchise/Adaptation" (2011) discusses how contemporary commercial adaptations (especially cinematic ones) employ adapting techniques to

perpetuate transmedia continuity of narrative content up to the point of saturation in order to multiply economic profit from a “single” storyline. Far from aiming to the status of master narrative, franchises are also, however, distant from the culturally fertile act of cross-pollination: the emergence of innovative, original narrative creatures out of established single or crossed storylines would likely make an already unstable set of texts all the more fragile. The process enacted in adaptation-based franchises is, rather, one of proliferation, a gimmicky transmutation, perhaps, of a close set of referents, whose idiosyncrasies percolate from one media to another. The ensuing interpolations, Parody argues, generate a form of narrative dispersion that is “diasporic” in its motion and “diffuse and unstable” in its expressive modalities (212).²⁶ Narrative structures built via adaptive methods do not respond to a general planning, their layers create untethered infrastructures that do not necessarily operate within a logic of long-term sustainability, let alone moving towards a definitive conclusion: “Where franchise production is diasporic and development un-coordinated, canonicity, continuity, and authority become problematic concepts, constantly re-negotiated [...]” (Parody 212). Parody only mentions in passing a feature of adaptation that is particularly crucial to my interest for the practice (and to this very research): how a lineage of adaptations from a single source inevitably forms, overtime, a sort of “canon”, a history that keeps growing the more popular a work becomes (thus fostering a kind of cultural fame which is in its turn sanctioned by the growing number of adaptations). A self-feeding circle, either a virtuous or vicious one according to the onlooker’s perspective, that Parody only hints at: “Adapting any single version of a plot or character thus means dealing with how it has shaped and positioned itself relative to those that have gone before it [...]” (212).

²⁶ Parody interestingly includes into her analysis the “grey literature” that theoreticians such as Hutchinson do not address. A possible conclusion, one that feels paradoxical, is that the plethora of ancillary materials related to transmedia franchises do not contribute to the core development of the central story, rather, they divert attention and proliferate the narrative matter without ever allowing it to coalesce into a unitary, cohesive closure. Parody writes:

Its boundaries are indeterminate, in the sense that franchise production is typically ongoing and open ended, and insofar as its narratives and worldbuilding frequently spill over into liminal texts like creator interviews or authorized guides, material that is quasi-fictional and quasi-paratextual. (212)

Overall, Parody's argument denouncing narrative expansion for commercial expansion's sake via redundant franchises seems comparable to Colin MacCabe's critique of the too-easy marketability of adaptations, their appeal mostly residing in their intrinsic familiarity, a reassuring strategy providing pleasure to audiences and compensation to producers. In his edited collection *True to the Spirit. Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity* (2011), MacCabe centres his discussion on the critical tradition surrounding adaptations: the focus on and celebration of intertextuality when assessing the relationships between original source and derivative works is strikingly similar, MacCabe contends, to the capitalist paradigm oiling the lucrative franchise machine of the entertainment industry. The primacy of distributive patterns of reproduction, whose value is situated in their extensiveness, is sinisterly repropounded in the style of critical writing that praises the multiplication of outlets as a theoretical and esthetical purpose in and of itself, thus endorsing those very dispersive commercial practices that often dilute a work's inner objectives in order to spread it as far and wide as possible (31). Page-to-screen as a paradigm for adaptation, it now appears clear, is dramatically ill-equipped to account for adaptive instances that not only break down the literature-to-film pattern, but also challenge and redefine the narrative economy based on Hutcheon's "repetition and variation" model. The stakes, it appears, are higher, and scarcely describable only in terms of Johnson's "passionate reading" via a cinephiliac affective mood.

While Johnson's proposal cannot, however, be dismissed altogether – a perspective shift that could embrace the individual criticism's bias and non-rational inclination would greatly benefit contemporary criticism, I would argue – since it highlights the reversal of the guiding voice, the retrieval of the interest in the creative process behind any reflective work (be it a derivative adaptation or a critical textual evaluation) that, again, focuses on the author and their intentions, either deliberate or contingent. Hutcheon had already sketched this optical dynamic as she attempted to answer the "Who? Why?" chapter questions²⁷ in *A Theory of Adaptation* by tackling the issue of "authoriality" in

²⁷ Hutcheon's taxonomical theory of adaptation does indeed furnish guidance with regards to how related works should be read – whether side by side, one on top of the other, separate or in conjunction – but seldom states fixed rules. Rather, Hutcheon highlights the nodes and junctions that present difficult

conjunction with the concept of “context” as a migrating (and often marketable) concept. Any creative work maintains the capability, nevertheless, to preserve and display authorial traces in the form of a mark of subjectivity. While this mark cannot, alone, vouchsafe the work with a set meaning, as a subjective imprint it provides audiences with political, cultural, ideological clues as to *how* the work was made, in addition to what it tells, or what it means. The notion of “context” itself is posited by Hutcheon as a triangular relationship between presentation and reception as they are mediated by “hype” (143), the amount of ancillary information guiding the public’s prompt acknowledgement of the product (including facts such as the cast’s celebrity status to the degree of media attention granted to the production), and assimilation at face-value of the adaptation as a viable product. A double-tier is therefore advanced by Hutcheon: on a first, immediate (subjective?) level, inferences and assumptions regarding “what could the author possibly mean by this?” happen organically by patching together aesthetic, stylistic and ideological hints. On a second, perhaps more engaging and intentional level, Hutcheon situates a dyscrasia between intent and result:

[...] extratextual statements of intent and motive often do exist to round out our sense of context of creation. Of course, these statements can and must be confronted with the actual textual results: as many have rightly insisted, intending to do something is not necessarily the same thing as actually achieving it. (109)

The poietic analysis that Hutcheon evokes is concerned with the material conditions that contribute or hinder the maker’s vision of the work, and which can often motivate specific readings or reactions towards it once it becomes public. The attractiveness of adaptations for audiences is not lost on Hutcheon, whose awareness of the public, popular life of stories dictates the urgency she displays when coming to terms (and

readings. She writes about reconsidering authorial intentions and the material conditions of creations: “But adaptations teaches that if we cannot talk about the creative process, we cannot fully understand the urge to adapt, and therefore perhaps the very process of adaptation. We need to know ‘why’” (Hutcheon 107). The “why” animating the decision to adapt remains uncharted territory, but the suggestions that Hutcheon further provides as to which factors and details to observe and note about any adaptation make up a very elastic theoretical model.

inviting fellow critics to do the same) with the fact that “knowledge about the ‘maker’s mind and personality’ can actually affect the audience members’ interpretation: [...] like the adapter, the audience too interprets in a context” (109). The “why” that motivates the adaptation process, therefore, needs to be located alongside the personal intentions of the makers, whose motives are manifold, ranging from the perspective of economic profit to the creative pull that wants to innovate, propagate, disrupt and amend by retelling.²⁸

Overall, Hutcheon broadly defines adaptation as a technical posture, rather than as a genre, by praising the anthropological idea that human groups preserve their culture by means of processes that attain “sameness through alterity” (173), or by concluding her discussion stating that “In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception” (177). However, Theorists Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan advance, in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (1999) a somewhat stricter classification. Their adaptations sub-categories, “transposition” and “commentary” (Cartmell and Whelehan 24) are in keeping with Hutcheon’s general approach to the subject, whereby a transposition enhances the derivative and comparative components at play in a transmedial operation, possibly by engaging with the notion of fidelity. Also, a commentary adaptation similarly relies on proximity, yet it does so in order to twist, bend, repurpose the narrative, rather than merely paying sober homage to it. Moreover, Cartmell and Whelehan directly include into the paradigmatic “adaptation” framework the notion of “analogue” as a derivative work whose links with a

²⁸ Hutcheon discusses in detail, in her penultimate chapter “Where? When?” (141), instances of adaptation that fully take advantage of the shifting/clashing of contexts and their political perception over time. She classifies these disruptive modes of adaptation as “transcultural adaptations” and “indigenization” when the borrowing crosses cultural and national boundaries; “historicizing” and “dehistoricizing” when the adaptation purposefully charges or erases its diegetic context in order to highlight a political situation; “racializing” and “deracializing” when the same process is enacted towards characters’ marked or unmarked ethnicity within the diegesis; “embodying” and “disembodying” when characters’ desires and inner motives are either displayed as a direct expression of feeling, or mediated via a stereotyped gaze. Indeed, all the aforementioned modalities of adaptation remain valid, I would argue, for audiences’ subjective and vernacular appraisal of the work, as in intertext and as a standalone piece.

previous source, or even with a previous adaptive intertext, are so faint that unknowing audiences are able to enjoy them regardless of their being aware of their adaptive standing. Whether traces such as those discussed with regards to authorial footprint and contextual contingencies are a feature of analogue adaptation, as well as “regular” ones, can likely be described on a case-study basis, but seems nearly impossible to theorise. What happens when the adapted referent is absent, or concealed, or unrecognisable, however, seems to be a question destined to change each time any subjecthood enters the equation: what happens to audiences? What happens to authors, makers, adapters, and writers? What happens to future audiences, and to future re-makers? When it comes to evaluate narratives adapted beyond recognition, the closest working category might be the notion of “appropriation”, which Hutcheon foresees when she acknowledges the chronological and geographical interpolations that radically alter narratives, and which Julie Sanders describes more at length in her monograph *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2015). Sanders locates at the point of enfranchisement from master or source narratives the “analogue” potential of adaptation to create anew:

Appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others. (35)

Overall, Sanders confirms and reinforces Hutcheon’s, Cartmell and Whelehan’s claims about the a-hierarchical relevance of adapted works, and develops the argument to include spurious specimens of para-adaptations: from embedded texts and interplay within a single, independent work, to creative borrowings ranging from the extensive, or “sustained” appropriation – homage, plagiarism and “travelling tales”, as well as variations on a theme – which cannot undercut their link to previous works. Sanders goes as far as to endorse (and I support her) a vision of narrative texts as a shared realm, much beyond the constraints of legal ownership, whose main mode of access is explorative, necessarily *appropriative*. Sanders even quotes Michel de Certeau’s notion of “textual poaching” (125) to describe the baseline necessities that underpin a healthy, varied narrative exchange, their urgency allegedly more powerful than cease-and-desist

admonishments. Canonicity itself becomes a useful, dialectical tool in Sanders' exposition, inasmuch as the disruptive, counteractive adaptation of a classic title accepts the fact that if, on the one hand, it upholds its statutory profile, it can also, nonetheless, provide new knowledge and alternative perspectives by tackling its multi-sourcedness and, namely, appropriating it (126).

Canonicity, which I posit as a problem, resists all attempts to narrow the argument of adaptation to its technical inner workings: given my choice of case-studies, I wonder whether my research reinforces a conventional, quasi dogmatic form of narrative standard. Despite my interest in indirect adaptive mechanisms, the fact that the works I intend to close-read and close-watch present several features in common with heritage and prestige cinema adaptation focusing on the British perspective, certainly infect my thinking. Claire Monk's extensive survey about UK heritage film audiences, published in appendix to her book *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (2011) mainly confirms empirical notions concerning the popular taste for costume adaptations: that there is no target "demographic", that a "mass public" is a mere abstract concept, since each spectator watching a heritage film production engages with it dynamically, employing a wide range of cultural and political perspectives, that enjoyment is often ironically detached, or serving as a prism to experience past living conditions, or even as an escapist celebration of a long-gone past. Monk drafted fifty-eight questions about personal habits of consumption and reflection regarding period films, which she submitted to volunteer readers of *Time Out* magazine and volunteer members of the National Trust (thus engaging to different demographic groups), in a two-year period, from 1997 to 1998. The pleasures that Monk's audiences describe when enjoying a period film pertain to and evoke feelings that are double sided. On the negative side, there is the nostalgia for a bygone, purportedly more serene past, the reactionary sentiment that, while fetishising the hardships of the past, experiences the present as decadence. On the positive side is the feel-good effect resulting from a relaxing two-hour fantasy of an embellished, sanitised past era. The affects and intentions that Monks registers are also pointed out (critically) by Andrew Higson in his essay "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film", collected in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema And*

Thatcherism (edited by Lester D. Friedman, 2006). By subbing it as “the heritage impulse” (95), Higson addresses the cinematographic enterprise conjoining page-to-screen adaptation and historical, aestheticised ambiance, and synthesizes its results a a “pastiche”, often reproduced as a “flat, depthless” dimension (95). The heritage adaptation’s only duty, Higson argues, is to convey a sense of historicity, but its paramount aspiration, crucially, is to do so via references to “other images, other texts” (95), thus erasing the original referent (contextual precision and truthful representation, most likely) to enhance a form of intertextuality that, generally, is self-referential. Commodified, pastiched, prettified, relentlessly reiterated in similarly familiar, hence equally profitable products: Higson’s vision of the national past as seen, in turn, through the heritage lens, is one of desolation and kitsch conservatorism.²⁹ The detachment between viewers’ sense of lived history and filmic timelessness is a crucial component of the adaptive strategy displayed in heritage productions: the preoccupation for a generic sense of “pastness”, via “period” details, its instrumental role in creating a “sense” of authenticity that guarantees scopical pleasure, but which is curiously at odds with the stress on “fidelity” that adaptations are repeatedly judged for. The fame of the literary source, of course, is another important selling point: familiarity with the plot and/or characters can combine with the prestige of the written word, thus elevating the whole filmic enterprise, while simultaneously catering to the pleasures of visual enjoyment, fanciful staging and, above all, the supplying of narrative escapism.

An outlook such as Higson’s would likely read phenomena like movie posters on the cover of their source text’s paperback reprints as an example of dismal mercification, or

²⁹ Higson’s analysis operates within a fixed chronological framework, that is, British film production in the decade overlapping with Margaret Thatcher’s mandate as UK Prime Minister. It may be unsurprising, therefore, that his description of British heritage cinema as a bleak, nation-wide attempt to distract and foster retroactive chauvinism is in par with an equally grim picture of rampant economic distress and aggressive foreign policies that would most likely have enraged the Nation, had it not been given solace and inspiration via home-bred cinema. Higson’s remarks are specific to his discussion of cultural Thatcherism, but are also relevant to the general character of films that combine the adaptive structure with the period setting, especially with regards to the effects of historicity vs. historical accuracy, the aestheticisation and fetichisation of the past vs. the sense of familiarity in repetition, film as escapism vs. film as educational tool.

dismiss fandoms and their creative appropriations as vernacular romantic obsession. There is, however, an undoubtedly positive contribution coming from popular costume adaptations: the search for escapism is often accompanied by the desire to retrieve, and read, the source novel; the appreciation for quaintness can also bring forth an interest for broader historical contexts, or at the very least, spark one's awareness for the evolving features that either improve or worsen the quality of life, as told via fictive narratives. The wide availability and easy accessibility of period adaptations, together with the high status conceded to their literary sources is a paradox that never ceases to astound me. I am not so much interested in resolving the conflict, as in, rather, preserving its ambiguity while describing the results of the duplication of a story, and understanding its subsequent multiplication across media as a multidirectional trajectory. Beyond the escapist lure (and need), the curated "period-feel" detail, the fail-safe celebrated title, what elements of film adaptations reflect back to their source and change it indelibly? How do they sustain an unobtrusive dialogue with previous film adaptations, or other media adaptation of the same material? Above all, I am interested in adaptive works whose principal referent is absent – i.e. there is no identifiable source – or scattered – i.e. the sources are manifold or arbitrarily arranged –, yet their end result contains legible signs and cross-referencing that suggest the qualities of an adaptation, or link the single work to a line of similar work. Moreover, whether the titular "costume" labelling the whole genre of aforementioned period adaptations can actually influence the storyline is a recurring question informing most of my discussion about fictional adaptation as para-historical narrative. The question of cultural specificity is also a recurring one, especially when a single work joins a large number of previous adaptations from the same source: how is a story set to bear meaning across cultural and linguistic divides? What new information reflects back onto the original source when authority and primacy granted by cultural adjacency are appropriated elsewhere, and the source is stripped bare in order to be repackaged for *other* audiences? This literature review chapter has attempted to sketch an itinerary throughout the basic functions of narratives as oriented by their treatment of truth within a crafted form and, alternatively, their approach to the past, whereby stories become instrumental to learning about a past truth via fictive forms. Theoretic contributions from single scholars

– Bakhtin’s “chronotope” and “heteroglossia”^[L]_[SEP]; Lotman’s notions periphery and centre within cultural “semiospheres”; Kristeva’s uneven duality of semiotic and symbolic in language; Hall’s cultural histories of visual media – join collaborative proposals such as “make believe” theories developed, among others, by Walton and Currie; as well as^[L]_[SEP]the case for the humanist value of literature as discussed by Harrison and Gaskin. The trajectory towards adaptation theory originates in questions regarding how re-telling and re-creating are conducive to migrant narrative forms that are capable of saying the new as they say anew. In parallel, adaptive techniques and theories are also responsible for cultural histories that directly respond to, and sometimes even react against the source work they reference or appropriate via a different media. The following chapters will each be devoted to a case study whose features or production history challenge the conventional notion of adaptation as a hierarchical, unidirectional practice that merely translates plotlines across media.

Chapter 2

Jane Campion Re-Reads the Canon

In December 2019, French director Céline Sciamma's latest feature film, *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (translated as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*) was released in European cinema theatres. In Italy, *Portrait* was mainly programmed over the Christmas weekend. Nevertheless, Sciamma's film instantly gained a cult-like success both with mainstream audiences and film critics, but especially among the demographic it likely aims to reach, and which sees itself reflected onscreen: queer-identified and queer-friendly women and girls under the age of thirty-five. The memetic propagation of screen grabs featuring its protagonists – painter Marianne (Noémie Merlant) and sitter-turned-lover Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) – flooded social media over the winter holidays: vernacular appraisals in the captions would often mimic or echo more rigorous critical takes on Sciamma's work expressed in professional reviews, or reiterate the film's perceived significance for its representation of queer love and Sciamma's unabashedly feminist approach to filmmaking. The sense of exhilaration, the shared expressions of joy and admiration for a piece of cinema depicting, "at last!", the parable of affective and sexual desire between two women were at the core of most reviews and tweets. *Portrait* is a costume drama, set in a carefully researched, yet curiously a-historical eighteenth century Brittany, featuring the burgeoning love story between professional painter Marianne and the heiress of the house Héloïse, whose portrait she has come to paint: Héloïse's Italian suitor has requested a picture of his would-be wife before committing to an official marriage proposal. Sciamma managed to deliver an overall simple product to an audience that was ripe, and literate enough, to receive it as a genre-affirming romance as well as an experiment in "female gaze"-conscious storytelling and filmmaking.

Ideas about female-only utopias, de-sexualised visions of female bodies, mythopoeic queer narratives and obliterated cultural histories of female professional artists were expressed, reiterated and twisted in most critical observations across the spectrum of cultural debate. Assessments of Sciamma's intricate, yet straightforward, system of visual quotations, however, did not prove as popular. The fact that *Portrait's* second scene blatantly references – creating a seemingly chiral image – Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano's* penultimate sequence was not, to my knowledge, fully discussed as a key feature in Sciamma's own placement within cinema history is, to say the least, peculiar. In the *Portrait's* sequence, Marianne is being transported by boat to the island where Héloïse's family resides, the stretch of sea she is crossing is agitated, causing one of her boxes to fall into the water. Incidentally, it is the very case containing her canvases and brushes, Marianne therefore jumps into the water – under the unflinching eye of the whole boat crew – to fetch her belongings. She is subsequently dumped, her dress and luggage still dripping wet, on an empty beach, and cursorily pointed in the direction of the mansion uphill. In *The Piano's* ending, during the final departure from her husband's remote estate to reach the New Zealand town of Nelson, protagonist Ada (Holly Hunter) insists that the boat crew throw the piano overboard. While her piano sinks, she purposefully places her foot, as a suicidal bid, at the centre of a coil of rope tied to the piano: she is immediately pulled overboard into the water, and dragged downward to the ocean floor. Ada, however, manages to disentangle her ankle from the rope and swim back to the surface, where she is rescued. Earlier in the film, moreover, Ada and her daughter had been similarly dumped, with all their packed belongings, on an empty beach. The analogies and echoes bouncing back and forth between Campion and Sciamma are drawn on a purely visual and formal level, barely touching on comparable elements of the plot, and the “period” feature of both films almost feels irrelevant. The fact that Sciamma's explicit homage to Campion passed almost unnoticed – escaping fan-made comparative collages and critics' enquiry on the plausibility of a deeper, stronger dialogue happening between *Portrait* and *Piano* – is indicative of the state of general disinterest towards, or rather, detachment from Campion's work in cultural discourse, despite its continued and undiscussed relevance for contemporary directors in activity. While Campion's name continues, indeed, to be

well-known and well-regarded, a suspicion may creep in, that her films tend to be listed in “classics” lists rather than being actually watched and discussed by the wider public. Literature reviews in academic studies on Jane Campion and her cinema invariably comment on the plethora of existing monographs and scholarly articles on the same subject. Studies range from film-specific essay collections, to studies of the musical soundtrack, to critical evaluations of the colonialist underbelly in Campion’s filmic Aotearoa. Despite (or possibly, because of) the diversity and scope of treatment within academia, Campion’s name nowadays struggles to exit the *auteur cinema* niche. Throughout her 2013 study *Jane Campion and Adaptation: Angels, Demons and Unsettling Voices*, Estella Tincknell reads Campion’s career as in keeping with the pattern experienced by other women directors: a fourfold cycle starting with a period of critical acknowledgement and popular celebrity, followed by attacks and disputes concerning the author’s creative independence and innovation, leading to a span of sustained critical oversight (a moment that Tincknell describes, in her introduction, as “organised forgetting”) which finds its conclusion in the rediscovery of the supposedly “forgotten” director. With the attainment of “cult status” among a scant group of (feminist-friendly) cinephiles, Campion risks, implicitly, incurring in the destiny of a sanctified figure whose canonical status makes her too essential to actually be interesting. It seems to me that, today, whereas the “Jane Campion” label has gained a high nominal currency, her films collect dust, unwatched, or perhaps simply unquoted and underdiscussed in mainstream channels.

Papers on Campion I have presented at academic conferences (either in literature and/or film studies frameworks) have been met with mild amusement or surprise: feedback would often focus on acknowledging how neglected her work had been over the past twenty years, on the need to obviate that, invariably thanking me for bringing a “fresh look” on a household, yet overlooked name. Outside of academic circles, explanations of my research regularly entailed a digression on Campion’s biography and filmography. I realised very early that, outside the majority who had never heard Campion’s name, the group who recognised it could be divided in two: people who were around when *The Piano* won oscars and palmes d’or, and people who have been algorithmically recommended by streaming services that they watch *Top of the Lake*.

The “rediscovery” forecasted by Tincknell, therefore, may already be in operation. Suffice to mention a recent celebratory example of new-found interest towards Campion, one that I happened to be present at. Campion’s appearance at the 2019 Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna, Italy, did not stir much press attention or become a trending topic in social media feeds, it was, however, kept in high regard within the festival itself: Campion gave a workshop to film students and was in public conversation with director Alina Marazzi and actress Alice Rohrwacher.³⁰ The two-hour long conversation, slowed down by consecutive translation, however, struggled to tackle the political underpinnings, the stylistic peculiarities and the geo-historical concerns in Campion’s filmography. Instead, it mostly lingered on biographical anecdotes that Campion told with flair and humour, as if she was a quirky grandmother rather than an experienced filmmaker. Nevertheless, and most importantly, the restored and subtitled version of *The Piano* was projected, free of charge, on the big screen flanking San Petronio basilica in Piazza Maggiore, Bologna. Now that new and younger audiences are being introduced to Jane Campion, there may be, hopefully, solid chances that the iconic potential of her filmic language could resume its circulation.

As a hopeful addition to the ongoing “Campion revival”, this chapter attempts an appraisal of Jane Campion’s filmic adaptation practice and a description of her integrated approach towards literary sources and film language. It focuses primarily on her three “period” or “costume” features: *The Piano* (1993), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) and *Bright Star* (2009). Most importantly, it charts Campion’s unique adaptation method, describing and discussing its rooting in her reading and interpretation of, foremost, literary counterparts and fictional companions to historical accounts.

The chapter opens with a chronological overview of Campion’s filmography and a discussion of Jane Campion’s role and reputation as *auteure*. The section tackles the (rather problematic and myopic) theoretical trajectory that typecasts creative personalities like Campion as impermeable entities, whose *directing* position encompasses any other professional figure and/or external influence and interference.

³⁰ The conversation “Lezioni di Cinema. Conversazione con Jane Campion” was part of the Cinema Ritrovato Festival programme, hosted by Cineteca di Bologna on 29 June 2019 in Bologna. The conversation was recorded and is freely available online.

It goes on to analyse the relationship between *The Piano* and its literary sources through the shared device of the female body in motion – a trope that Campion borrows from her indirect sources, such as the Brontë sisters’ literary oeuvre – which she visually develops by means of costume and atmospheric locales. The section also addresses the homage/plagiarism divide that haunts Campion’s unacknowledged references to New Zealand author Jane Mander’s 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River*.

The chapter subsequently moves on to discuss the significance of Campion’s Jamesian adaptation, *The Portrait of a Lady*, as a commentary on cinema history rather than a mere “free” or “personal” adaptation of a literary source. The twist that Campion imposes on the story’s ending is no less relevant, I argue, than her structural experiments with film materiality, colour and traditions of storytelling that she scatters throughout her own *Portrait*. The chapter eventually engages with Campion’s John Keats biopic, *Bright Star*, another instance of loose, imaginative adaptation, in this case based on non-literary sources (Keats’ letters and poems and academic biographies). In *Bright Star*, I argue, the non-canonical source items that Campion chooses to underpin her original narrative find their correlative in the subject-focused slant of the narrative itself: the biopic genre is bent in order to include the poet’s muse and give her centre stage. Campion achieves this “revisionist” effect through the use of costume, in a way that reiterates and develops the attention to personal attire as an indicator of characterization and plot she showed with *The Piano*. Costume, in *Bright Star*, becomes a meta-reflective tool: Fanny Brawne’s consistent on-screen tailoring and stitching builds up to a reflection on the nature of work and the value of art that is paramount to the biopic as critical practice, rather than as hagiographic genre. The concluding section attempts an overview of Campion’s idiosyncratic adaptation practice in light of the case studies.

In a 1993 interview with Andreas Furler for magazine *Filmbulletin*,³¹ Campion discusses her *Piano* project in the making, and states: “I love the literature of the nineteenth century. The story has indeed that flavour and atmosphere” (qtd. In Wright Wexman 91). Direct, unequivocal ties with a single work of literary fiction, in fact, tend to be discarded throughout Campion’s filmography in favor of a seemingly heuristic, outstretched, multi-sourced approach to inter-media translation. Campion seems perennially interested in crafting a mood out of a shared repository of signifiers that evoke the idea of past (or past-ness) rather than openly engaging with it. Campion’s adaptation of a specific, yet unacknowledged literary canon – the anglophone nineteenth century literary tradition spanning British-centric Romanticism, Victorianism and the Jamesian novel of transatlantic modernity – seems, therefore, rooted in culturally-bound ideas of such texts, rather than in the verbal material of those very texts. Deb Verhoever describes Campion as “a director of bookish credibility” (66), hinting at her delight in piling literary references that do not signal their exact origin back, but rather exist within a “chain of interpretations” (66) that exonerates Campion for claiming and exert full and individual authority on the notions she elaborates on with her films.

Campion transposes her sources in ways that differ from mere translations, or even transmediations, of plots, narratives and characters. The relationship between Campion’s visual narratives and the textual narratives she hints at are traceable in the narrative scope and focus she indicates. Campion seems more prone to extraction and exportation from the page to the screen of the rationale of a scene, rather than its logistical schematics. For instance, Henry James’ homosocial gathering of men in the opening scene in *Portrait of a Lady* pivots, in Campion’s 1996 adaptation, into an equally homosocial meeting, but one consisting of young women only. In Campion, the materiality and structure granted by the original sources fades behind the atmospheric mood attached to better-known, albeit vague, cultural signposts. For example, Jane Mander’s 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River* may work as the hidden source

³¹ Furler’s interview is part of the collected volume of Jane Campion interviews edited by Virginia Wright Wexman, *Jane Campion: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 91. This volume was instrumental for my research of Campion’s own appraisal of her works, especially her early ones, given the unavailability of online versions of press interviews from that time.

for plot in *The Piano*, but it is from tropes such as “woman travelling unaccompanied” “dark wilderness” and “brutal male figure/husband”, that are easily recognizable as Brontë sisters emblems, that the film borrows its sombre tone, and arguably achieves its “literary” character.

Campion’s employment of a visual “past tense” in her films appears to grant her the theoretical space she needs to explore and depict forms of transgression. Rather than highlight specimens of “love passions” as key subjects, Campion’s fictional nineteenth centuries appear to function as a sort of moral and juridical buffer zone allowing the study and representation of the logic(s) driving individuals’ passions, the social conditions that enable their appearance, the social demands that justify their restriction. Campion’s representations of conventionality in social behaviors and its regulators come across especially through the notions of “fear” and “shame” that are scattered as narrative propellers and as unmarked contextual signifiers. “In time she’ll become affectionate” whispers Aunt Morag (Kerry Walker) to Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill) when Ada rejects any affective contact with her husband in *The Piano*. The crafting of a composed version of the self – the state of being that is requested from Ada is a form of decorous gentility that gradually spirals into a sort of demure hysteria – as a recurring theme goes hand in hand with Campion’s reification of a presumptive “Victorian” body. Costume is crucial as it embeds the narrative conflict arising from ideas about privacy, shame, propriety, fear as well as fixed gendered hierarchies that, filmically, appear as obsolete, historical and “time-appropriate” as the very costumes the characters wear. Campion’s interest in attire and tailoring is a conduit to characters’ performances – a true and proper narrative prop, especially in the case of Fanny Brawne’s (Abbie Cornish) proficiency at hand stitching in *Bright Star* – as well as visual accessories that participate in the aesthetic creation of a hazy, yet cosy, “past” ambiance.

There are, however, some problematic aspects tied with the romance genre and the escapist mode of fruition that period pieces such as Campion’s, which seem to prioritise the “nostalgic” mode of entertainment over historically mindful narratives. As Belén Vidal notes in her book *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (2012) there are structural similarities among film narratives that veer towards a pleasant-looking rendition of the “past”: a sort of “frozen” rhythm, the sense of a

“perpetual present”, the image of the “house-museum” (18). “Pastness appears disconnected from the (historical) past by an aesthetic of surfaces” (18) argues Vidal. Arguably, the disconnect that Vidal describes is present in Campion as well, especially in the selective historiography that she crafts by means of her period films: the erasure of the violent history of European and British colonization in Australia and New Zealand, her appropriation of Māori symbolism along with a somewhat unflattering representations of indigenous communities have all been noticed and described³² as instances of a subdued “colonial gaze”. However, as Leonie Pihama notes in her “Ebony and Ivory” chapter in *Jane Campion’s “The Piano”* (eds. Harriet Margolis, 2000), Campion’s visual rhetorics seemingly alternate between a sort of “authenticity of representation” and “artistic licenses”: her authorial originality arguably stems from the grey, yet intelligible zone that separates genre conventions and fictive speculations. Accordingly, the profile of landscapes, the portraiture of territories that are at once natural and visibly anthropized within Campion’s construction of open spaces can either signal the historical subtext that her narratives do not include, and purposefully reference conventional ideas about what a sentimentally eloquent ambiance. Kimberly Chabot Davis understands Campion’s composite works as the result of a precise directorial stance that allows viewers to “think while feeling” (65), and Hilary Neroni holds a similar point with regards to the porousness between sensory and cognitive knowledge: “As Campion depicts it, passion is a formal expression of the psyche, not just what one thinks but also how one thinks” (291). The forms of understanding at stake, however, seem to exceed the mere “emotional” level of participation: Campion’s rendition of a past cultural tradition is, indeed, informed by the sentimental, identificatory force of scopophilic experience, but, crucially, also relies on a complex system of cultural signifiers whose recognition can substantially modify each film’s scope. The following section will provide a general overview of Campion’s filmography and discuss the history of her reputation as a canonical filmmaker, along with the fragmentations of

³² The chapter section on *The Piano* will deal more specifically with these issues, it will draw especially from the work of John Izod and Leonie Pihama, as well as Mark A. Reid’s reading of the film through a “post-Negritude” framework (both essays are collected in Margolis, 2000). Such research was key in opening my eyes to the colonial legacy that is still rooted in seemingly “post”-colonial narratives.

her status as a “woman director” and “feminist *auteur(e)*”. Furthermore, it will lay the ground to the analysis of Campion’s approach to adaptation.

2.1. Jane Campion as Author/Auteure

Jane Campion spent her early life in a theatrical milieu, as her parents founded and directed theatre company New Zealand Players in the mid 1950’s, while concurrently raising their children (born in 1954, Campion was the second of three siblings). Campion’s wealthy and art-friendly background helped her leave her native Wellington, New Zealand, to pursue a range of different educational paths: an anthropology bachelor’s degree, art school classes in the UK and, eventually, film school in Sydney, Australia. After her graduation in the early 1980s from the AFTRS (Australian Film, Television and Radio School, a federally-funded body that provides education and infrastructural backing to aspiring filmmakers), Campion was able to make three short feature films with Australian public financial support (Aquila 143). Along with Campion’s first television film *Two Friends* (1986), her shorts *Passionless Moments* (1983) and *Girl’s Own Story* (1984) were eventually selected by French critic festival programmer Pierre Rissient for the *Un Certain Regard* programme at Cannes Festival in France in 1986, where another short, *Peel* (1982), was eventually awarded the Palme d’Or prize for best short film. *Peel* introduces themes and visual vocabulary that Campion would then develop throughout her career, specifically her use of haptic camera angles and her interest in near-crisis situations happening in (and fostered by) isolated, liminal spaces. In *Peel*, a family of redheads – father and son, and their sister/aunt – experience escalating tension during a car trip when the boy starts dropping out the window pieces of orange rinds. Small-enclave dynamics, isolated by natural boundaries and an unwelcoming infrastructure (such as a car, or a road) appear as the favoured set of conditions allowing Campion’s analysis of petty rationales and impromptu gestures. *Girl’s Own Story* also encapsulates tropes that Campion will revisit again in other features – such as her visual composition of feminine groups in a gathering, the close inspection of gendered, female-related objects, e.g. shoes, clothes, toys, etc. – and, possibly, her foremost political concern: what the education of young girls looks like, and

how its foundational principles, combined with its lacunae, affect girls' lives as they grow.

Cannes later hosted the première of Campion's first feature film, *Sweetie*, in 1989. The spacial and specifically urbanistic tension at bay between the Australian suburbs and the outback geolocates the familial conflict portrayed in *Sweetie*. Sisters Dawn "Sweetie" (Geneviève Lemon) and Kay (Karen Colston) come to cohabit again for the first time in years after leaving their parents' house. The relationship is tense, due to Sweetie's difficult (albeit unnamed, and possibly undiagnosed) mental health condition and Kay's plummeting relationship with her boyfriend. Campion seems to make use of recurring visual symbolism as a way to cater to the viewer, helping them get a hold of the plot despite the patchy exposure of characters' motives. The arboreal symbolism is especially striking, trees overtly play a part as material metaphors shared between couples (e.g. sister/sister, boyfriend/girlfriend, father/daughter), and further acquire a crucial role in narrative development: they are vegetable beings set against human beings. "I was keen to create a subconscious quality to the film" says Campion in a 1989 interview, and confirms her interviewer's suggestion that the imagery in *Sweetie* has "a mythic quality" (Geller 13): the understanding that Campion seeks to foster in her audience is one that comes out of rooted cultural consensus, rather than from the film's own grammar. In this same 1989 interview with Lynn Geller for *Bomb* magazine, Campion speaks – and is portrayed – as a soon-to-be celebrity director, and her future plans for her career are carefully inspected. At that time, Campion was best known for *Sweetie*, and reports her ongoing plans about shooting "a three-hour TV miniseries special, an adaptation of an autobiography of a New Zealand novelist named Janet Frame" (Geller 13), which would then become *An Angel at my Table*. Campion also shares that, at the time of speaking, she had been at work on a draft for a new script (for the *The Piano*, most likely), she does state, however, that she's allotting time for "one more project and then I'd like to retire for at least three or four or five years. [...] and do something else for a while and wait until I have something I really want to say again" (Geller 14). When the interviewer notes that the expected reaction for a director on the verge of mainstream success would be to "capitalize on the moment", Campion replies "I'm just a nun to my career at the moment" (Geller 14).

Campion may not have been able to take the long break she expected after producing *The Piano* in 1993, since *Portrait of a Lady* followed in 1996, but she did manage to slow down, possibly to defer creative endeavours to a more suitable, meaningful pace. After all, Campion's interest in the intimate life of her female characters is the lifeline of her filmography, an ongoing tendency that she could not have developed so skillfully had she not carved out time of her own, for her own family and privacy. Campion's insistence on the need to separate her work from her personal time – she concludes the interview by stating that “I'd just like to take some time out for life” (Geller 14) – is a concept that she reinstated at various reprises in later interviews, and that also seems to inform her filmic practice. In a 1996 interview with Rachel Abramowitz about *Portrait of a Lady*, in which she discusses Isabel Archer's agency as a primary maker of her life and prospects, Campion also leans into larger considerations about the social values at stake *outside* the fictional space of the film.

I think it is a really important issue for women today, or men and women today, [to realise] that life is not made up of career choices. One of the most important things is to participate in relationships and friendships and particularly in the mythology of love. (qtd. in Wright Wexman 187)

While the distance between the private self and one's productive, public persona may have appeared as an ethical stance, or a narrative preference rather than a holistic precept during Campion's successful mid-career years, recent interviews display her deeper convictions about what a good life should, or can look like. In a 2014 interview with Andrew Pulver for *The Guardian*, Campion opens up about the decade of personal and professional difficulties that she encountered after the international accolades she received for *The Piano*:

I really loved *Portrait*, even if it didn't satisfy people's expectations about what I should be doing. It's complex, because life isn't a career. At exactly the same time that I won the Palme d'Or I had a baby that died, so the full impact of my success never hit me. I was grieving, really, throughout that whole year. It was a very difficult period, but at the same

time it also protected me from any overblown thoughts. I was just struggling to exist.
(Pulver)

Holy Smoke, the 1999 film that followed *Portrait of a Lady* – which she co-wrote with her sister Anna Campion – bears numerous points of contact with *Sweetie*: besides the contemporary setting, both films are preoccupied with instances of spiritualism and the individual search of meaning that is only laterally (and consequentially) linked to (gender, class and racial) identity. The waves of grief following a loss propelling the narrative development of both films have topical and universal relevance, whereas both *Holy Smoke* and *Sweetie* also seem to deal, at a foundational, hidden level, with instances related to what Sophie Sunderland terms “the dominant myth of secular, suburban patriarchy” (83). Kate Winslet’s star presence – cast as the film’s protagonist, Ruth – evokes the period-piece characters she had built her career upon up to that point, most notably, *Sense and Sensibility*’s Marianne Dashwood (Ang Lee, 1995), *Jude*’s Sue Brideshead (Michael Winterbottom, 1996), *Hamlet*’s Ophelia (Kenneth Branagh, 1997), and *Titanic*’s Rose DeWitt Bukater (David Cameron, 1997). Winslet’s Ruth, under Campion’s direction, literally strips off the soothing façade of period-feel attire in order to perform Ruth’s psycho-sexual manipulation of PJ Waters (Harvey Keitel) and reify the quest for meaning that she is after.

The search for enlightenment that Campion directs stems from the stereotypical imagery of India and its religious gurus – Ruth turns her touristy holiday into a spiritual journey when she decides to join an ashram and burn her plane ticket home, in Sydney suburbia – and goes on to list, and show, many other examples of cult-like strategies of control and submission. Horrified by Ruth’s joining of a guru-led religious cult in India, her family hires an American “expert”, PJ Waters, to “deprogramme” her and convince their “golden girl” to return to Australia. PJ’s three-day programme seems to work according to his plans until Ruth twists the power balance to her favour: she burns her costume, a white sari she insists on wearing, and stands naked in front of PJ in order to seduce him. The sexual, intergenerational relationship the two embark on quickly becomes a deprogramming of PJ’s identification with traditional masculinity, and a debunking of the masculinity “cult” as part of the suburban ideology that permeates the

lives of Ruth's extended family. Campion's comedic family portrait throws into relief the independent-minded figure of the young woman searching for "something better" – i.e. an outlook on life that transcends her gender – but the Australian outback also functions as a sparse backdrop for lateral reflections about what "counts" as a valid education:

Emptied of time and history, this desert functions almost as a "holding space" with which to explore the limits of secular, white Anglo-Celtic, middle class, suburban patriarchal ideology. This spatialization of secular conceit cannot be dissociated from neo-colonial amnesia and anxiety about multiculturalism. (Sunderland 83)

The dynamics that Campion lays bare against a secluded and empty landscape are akin to those she enquired with *The Piano*: how even well-intended pressures from families can be complicit with the selective distributions of power among individuals that are rooted in normative constructions of femininity and masculinity. With her next film, *In the Cut*, Campion reiterates her interpretation – and visual unveiling – of hegemonic power play. This time, however, she combines adaptation from an existing book source and, for the first time, New York City as a location.

Campion's foray into American settings came in tandem with her return to adaptation from novels. With *In the Cut* (2003), however, canonical, highbrow literary sources and references are replaced with a work of commercial contemporary genre fiction. Susanna Moore wrote *In the Cut* in 1995 purposefully as a novel that could fall, plot-wise, in the noir-thriller genre, but that would also spin the traditionally masculine-oriented vein of the classic murder-mystery storyline by means of recurrent, explicit use of erotic scenery and language. Campion specifically picks up on the sexual matter of the novel in order to, simultaneously, reclaim and downplay the vulgar, the obscene, the violent that are inherent parts of conventional thriller dynamics whereby female characters are relentlessly forced into the victim part. In her adaptation, Campion ensures that protagonist Frannie Avery (Meg Ryan) elicits audience's sympathy while simultaneously displaying ambivalent, contradictory and inconsistent behaviours, enough to give off a murky portrayal of adult womanhood. Frannie works as an English high school teacher and carries on independent field research on oral slang vocabulary in her free time. Her approach is, at best, ethnographic and participatory, at worst, exploitative and unethical.

Frannie employs one of her students as a source, and meets him after-school in squalid bars to talk about slang words and their meanings. She gets contacted by detective Giovanni Malloy (Mark Ruffalo) after one of such outings: a murdered sex worker was last seen at the same bar Frannie attended. The conversation soon becomes flirtatious, and the two embark on a series of erotically charged encounters – despite the grimy subject of their talks – and eventually become lovers. Campion faithfully follows Moore’s chronology so as to enhance the conflicting ethical dynamics at play diegetically (both Malloy and Frannie breach their professional deontology, besides displaying lamentable attitudes with regards to gender and race issues) and within the realm of viewers’ experience and pleasure. *In the Cut*’s clever strategy hinders straightforward side-taking, and forces audiences to audit personal automatisms in the face of female sexual agency: whether Frannie’s visible sex life marks unreliability, indecency and, ultimately, invites callousness, or whether it merely adds complexity to a full-fledged and challenging character.

Lucy Butler (2013) compiles a rich list of quotations from critical reviews (the majority of which appeared in mainstream outlets since, Butler notes, *In The Cut* inspired few academic appraisals). *In The Cut* received generally negative reviews spanning from the unconvinced to the vitriolic, with critics remarking on its feminist didacticism, the miscasting of Meg Ryan, its supposedly erroneous twist on the slasher film genre, its unwelcomed focus on female victimhood and hyper-vulnerability to violence. “This pervasive vulnerability, both emotional and physical, is integral to the problem the film poses, exacerbating the viewer’s discomfort and inspiring the most hostile commentary” (Butler 17): the irritation brought on by unclear plotlines and ambiguous characterisation has spurred, Butler argues, critical receptions that echo the same misogyny that the film attempts to show and denounce. Furthermore, Butler points out Campion’s stylistic use of fragmentary editing and monochromatic switches to build surreal sequences and fuzzy plotlines: affective association, rather than rational causation, is Campion’s visual and narrative staple (Butler 12). Butler (and I support her feeling) clearly appreciates the film’s ambiguities, and suggests that future criticism should embrace the grey areas the Campion address genre-wise and narrative-wise.

At the time of writing, Campion's last feature-length work intended for cinema screens is the period biopic *Bright Star* (2009). Since 2013, Campion has worked primarily as the director and screenwriter of TV miniseries *Top of the Lake*.³³ Detective Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss) stars in both seasons, each focusing on a single criminal case and, in parallel, Robin's private life, whose details are slowly revealed along with the development of her investigations. Season one is set in a village in rural New Zealand, whereas season two is set in Sydney, and centers Australian urban spaces. In both seasons detective Griffin investigates the disappearance of young, pregnant Asian women, teenage Tui (Jacqueline Joe) in season one, sex worker/surrogate mother Cinnamon (Thien Huong Thi Nguyen) in season two. Simultaneously, detective Griffin comes to term, in season one, with the violence in her own past – the gang rape she survived aged fifteen, which resulted in her pregnancy – and eventually attempts reconciliation, in season two, with her daughter Mary (Alice Englert), whom she had given up for adoption a few days after her birth.³⁴ *Top of the Lake* is primarily preoccupied with issues of extraction and exploitation of female sexual and reproductive labour – specifically immigrant and underage Asian women's – whether through pornography, child abuse, sex work and/or (forced) surrogate maternity. Once again, Campion employs the popular murder-mystery format to highlight conflicts that are usually only dealt with laterally, or as a background consequence in traditional male-lead shows (murder and violence against women, workplace ethics that exclude women, social fabrics that isolate and silence female citizens).

³³ *Top of the Lake* is a TV miniseries in two seasons (2013, 2017). Campion co-created it with her writing partner Gerard Lee and co-directed it with Garth Davis (season one) and Ariel Kleiman (season two).

³⁴ In her essay "Beyond *Bluebeard*: feminist nostalgia and *Top of the Lake* (2013)", Sue Thornham traces an interesting comparison between the repurposing of fairytale myth archetypes that Campion previously employed in *The Piano* – in which the Bluebeard psychoanalytic template informs the marital conflict at heart of Campion's 1993 work – and the similar act she later performs in the TV series. In *Top of the Lake*, Thornham argues, the underlying myth is that of Proserpine and Demeter, whose chthonic parental trajectory is echoed in the patchy, yet loving relationship that detective Griffin establishes with her daughter Mary. The mother/daughter bond, Thornham notes, is explored as an anti-Oedipal relationship, one that eschews the incestual force in paramount patriarchal genealogies and recovers suppressed links founded on unalienated love and located into embodied subjects.

In her essay “Paradise, Built in Hell: Decolonising Feminist Utopias in *Top of the Lake* (2013)”, Sophie Mayer discusses the decolonising pull at work in *Top of the Lake*: a decolonization from a white-centric gaze as well as from masculine-focused narratives based on police (and police-like) surveillance. Observation in *Top of the Lake*, Mayer posits, is a practice that aims at explaining, unveiling what is customarily or conveniently hidden, rather than controlling or rebuilding consensus through blatant exercise of power – law enforcement, criminalization and brutalization – the story-line eventually achieves “the submerged (repressed?) resurfacing in the real” (103). Rather than adopt conventional crime narratives development scheme – a crime happens, detectives inquire, culprits are identified and the case closes by the end of the episode – Mayer argues that *Top of the Lake* extended storytelling conjures a bigger picture, namely, one that evaluates the nature of a dystopian social contract against the order experimented in a utopian setting (107). Alternative communities such as the women-led Paradise commune in season one, or non-normative kinships such as the sex workers’ (forced) co-habitation and Mary’s adoptive, extended family in season two are consistently cast against – as conscious resistance, Mayer argues (108) – state-regulated and police-enforced hierarchy. Moreover, Mayer adamantly remarks on Campion’s awareness shift from her 1993 tale of Māori landscapes, *The Piano*, since she has crafted, in *Top of the Lake*, a white heroine that does not (unlike Ada)³⁵ centralise all political praxis towards her condition as a unique female subject: “Robin models for the viewer what it means, as a *Pākehā*, to come to place oneself within a Māori optic: to be in -topia, emplaced within, and cognisant of, a violent history of dispossession and a counter-history of survivance” (113). However, Campion’s sophomore experience with *Top of the Lake* seemingly abandons ideas of Māori resurfacing and feminist eutopias based on spiritual kinship rather than bloodlines. The urban setting in cosmopolitan Sydney allows Campion to further explore the idea of maternity and the perceived purpose of female bodies rather than recover the decolonizing discourse she introduced

³⁵ *The Piano* has been amply criticized for its alleged “colonial” treatment (as exploitation) of Māori characters, culture, symbols and iconography as mere props, rather than functional components of the narrative development in *The Piano*. The chapter section on *The Piano* will also address the available scholarship about Campion and postcolonial theory.

in the first season. *Top of the Lake: China Girl* certainly centres the disparity of treatment existing between white and coloured bodies – the vulnerability of Asian women living in Australia as undocumented/irregular immigrants is strickligly set against the agency granted to white women like detective Griffin, Mary and her adoptive mother Julia (Nicole Kidman). The prismatic narrative that Campion composes in season one comes out as decidedly partial to detective Griffin’s personal tribulations, thus effacing Mayer’s hopeful imagery of alternative social orders in favour of slightly modified versions of rather normative familiar nuclei (detective Griffin, after all, is and remains a police officer). At the time of writing, *Top of the Lake* is the latest work by Campion available to the public, and plans for future projects and releases are still unclear. Despite her age, Campion has not expressed any wish to retire.

Over the years Jane Campion and her body of work have attracted a considerable amount of attention from both academic and mainstream outlets, yet the gendered understanding of “Jane Campion” as a director and as an expressly “female” and/or “feminist” author deserves further treatment. Julia Erhart’s survey of journalistic construction of Campion’s authorship (2019) leads her to assert that “Campion has been somewhat boxed in by narratives of her own uniqueness” (70). The only (at the time of writing) female winner of the Cannes Festival Palme d’Or prize, the (seemingly) only director capable to seamlessly transition from highbrow cinema to corporate TV production, Campion is conventionally portrayed, Erhart notes, as a crucial nexus within a network of women actors, directors, film industry professionals:

[...] Campion is often positioned relationally in a leadership role as mentor, leader, sponsor, and dispenser of industry wisdom and serves as a role model for more junior women directors and actors and a stalwart campaigner for women to be included and made visible within the hyper-competitive, male-dominated world of commercial film and television production. (70-71)

Moreover, Campion seems to enjoy a sort of immunity from ageism in the film industry, being a woman over the age of 60 that still directs large-scale, high-budget film sets of high responsibility. In Campion’s case, exceptionalism, household reputation, age as experience seem to fruitfully combine into a form of power that Campion is able to

harness and exploit to her own gain, regardless of physical changes that are culturally encoded as decay (and that most women experience as such). A porous understanding of the complex economies at play within a filmic work, regardless of its commercial intention or artistic status, might hopefully offer wider grounds to understand, and possibly overcome, the issues at stake within the “authorship”/“auteurship” critical model. My discussion mainly addresses scholarly work that is ostensibly concerned with Campion’s work and its entailment with concepts of authorship, specifically arguments made by Tincknell (2013) and Verhoeven (2009), who similarly call out the biased framework that privileges a “director-driven” approach to film theorising and marketing. A theoretical shift inviting for more distance from author-ontologies was theorised by Michel Foucault in his 1969 lecture “What is an Author?”³⁶ in which he argues for a more flexible understanding of what constitutes an authored item – including “immaterial” products such as ideas, theorems and traditions – therefore opening up the boundaries of the creative process and the recognition of its results. The notion of “authorship” and its related subcategory, “auteurship” is a problematic tool for both creators and critics, especially when they embody feminised or non-normative subjectivities. Authorship/auteurship as a critical tool has historically been dismissed or downscaled, especially by feminist commentators, who, as Shelley Cobb notes in *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (2015), are aware of the rhetoric patterns and linguistic supply that allow male creators to frame their work in terms of paternity and filial dependency, therefore establishing a model of prestige that rewards supposed “authorial originality” and allows individual creators to establish power and control on the form of “authority” (20). Cobb also addresses the “self-authorising” operations in action with directors like Campion (Cobb also lists Sally Potter and Patricia Rozema) when they set out to produce, within a male-dominated industry and cultural landscape, “literary movies” that actively challenge the fixed notion of authorship and the “past” nature of classic texts: an affirmation that must not rely on the mixed or polarizing reactions from both critical and popular audiences, but needs to endure it

³⁶ Foucault delivered the lecture at Collège de France on 22 February 1969, collected in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (1977).

instead (22). Campion's cinema, however, can hardly be defined as "feminist", and Campion herself never employed openly feminist jargon and themes in her discussion of her work, which, however, is unsurprising considering the hostility of the environment she works in, the relative "novelty factor" in her being among the first women directors ever shortlisted for major awards. The refusal to become a feminist icon shields Campion from that same affiliation being used against her in times of conservative backlash: it appears as a self-imposed alienation from rhetorical language that preserves her discourse from being, at best, pigeonholed or, at worst, muted. While Campion refuses to "play the lady card", as she recommends young filmmakers in a *Guardian* interview with Eva Wiseman from 2013, she is nevertheless acutely aware of the "celluloid ceiling" and the gender gap in the film industry. Most importantly, she is not neutral about it, and perceives it as something worth addressing and changing: in the same *Guardian* piece she states that if 50% of movies were made by women directors "instantly the culture would change". In her eponymous 2007 monograph, Kathleen A. McHugh describes Campion's stylistic signature as an appropriative mechanism that becomes particularly visible in her adaptation works. Furthermore, she claims that "[...] an insistent emphasis on Campion's similarity to or identification with the source texts' protagonists results in these films functioning autobiographically" (139). McHugh goes as far as to argue that the "autobiographical impulse" (139) is a feature of the original scripts by Campion, still, her conclusion detects a crucial significance at the intersection between film practice and personal growth.

[...] the extratextual and textual framing of these adaptations have functioned as a developmental portrait of Campion as a woman and an artist, carefully imagining the implications of gender, craft, and aesthetic engagement at different moments in her career. (McHugh 151)

My argument, on the contrary, is wholly uninterested in the individual person called Jane Campion, let alone her private biography. It employs her name as a conventional umbrella term in order to talk about the creative and professional process that involved the collaboration of many other people in conceiving and achieving her films. Deb Verhoeven, for instance, builds on the theory of post-auteurism to pay tribute to the

communal effort behind film production. Collaboration entails a wide range of professionalism and creativity, spanning between many figures and their intentions as individuals, and the industrial infrastructure that mediates and defines what films get to be made (and, therefore, watched). Verhoeven suggests a holistic approach to thinking about film, which should entail more than vertical individual action: “The questions that can be asked are not about intentions, origins or recognition, but about the trans-mediation of films as carriers of meaning” (177). As Tincknell notes, the “Campion brand” as a distinctive array of aesthetic features that make up Campion’s signature style – an intellectual enquiry into the erotic and emotional inner lives of women protagonists, formalised, static mise-en-scene, off-kilter or highly pronounced camera work, luscious costumes and colours – is the combined result of her and her collaborators’ efforts (23). Along with her producer Jan Chapman and editor Veronika Jenet, cinematographers Sally Bongers and Stuart Dryburgh have been instrumental in crafting the “defamiliarizing” interior shots that single out a “Campion” film.³⁷ Costume designer Janet Patterson, moreover, has moved on from curating the period costumes in *The Piano* and *Portrait* to fully art-direct later films such as *Bright Star*. Most importantly, my discussion engages with her gender as a cultural cipher rather than as an epistemological signifier. While her identity as a woman may be responsible for a certain attunement to political and structural issue influencing women’s lives and their influence on grander cultural narratives, it is the specifically “feminine” subjects and themes featured in her films – on many levels: from casting to mise-en-scene – that determines Campion’s relevance (or, arguably, her systemic dismissal). It is precisely on these terms that my discussion takes place: an assessment of Campion’s critical reading of her gender’s social history as advanced by means of her filmic practice. I am not at all concerned with the motives that brought her to choose a certain text as source for a film: issues relating to identification with the characters, affinity with their emotional landscape and psychological arch pertain to Jane Campion alone as a reader and as a person, not as a public figure creating film. Most importantly, I believe that intellectual inquiry should act on public products rather than on private motivations, and that private

³⁷ See *Jane Campion* by Dana Polan (2001) for detailed consideration of the influence of Campion’s collaborators.

or biographical motives should appear sparingly in public critical discourse, as corollary evidence rather than as methodological premise: Jane Campion is, first and foremost, an individual with a right to her privacy. As Julia Erhart notes, the factual influence of the authorship device is no longer a critical tool that enables the indexing of single directors' style and tropes, "authorship is now negotiated between communities of audiences, journalists, and industry members in unpredictable ways" (68).

Adaptation as a willful act, an expression of interpretive agency, is strictly tied to the notion of authorship. In *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Shelley Cobb states that "the subversive potential of adaptation is appealing for women filmmakers and that the main point of subversion is in the authorial function" (15). Cobb's notion of "authorship" is linked to the idea of agency, whose achievement and expression become struggles when the director (or screenwriter, or producer, DOP etc.) identifies and passes as a woman. Cobb stresses the need for criticism to expand its vocabulary with regards to adaptations, hopefully getting rid of the binary trope of "fidelity" in order to adopt the more flexible metaphor of "conversation" (10-11). A different critical paradigm would frame the source/adaptation relationship as an exchange happening on an equal level and rejecting, therefore, chronological hierarchies or formal supremacies. Hence a conversational approach to narrative works that would share some degree of affinity without the imperative to set organisational directions in tracing any identifiable kinship. The discursive method that Cobb argues for is simultaneously grounded in intertextuality and productive of intertextuality (12), a system that does not discriminate its sources and, moreover, is open to ideas about authorship – and, consequently, control and possession – that are less constrictive. Putting to use a term like collaboration, for instance, would not only stretch the dual link between novel and film, but could also allow a more spacious acknowledgement and awareness of the professional work and talent that are equally needed at every stage of literary or film production, thus highlighting the diversity of figures involved in the creation and management of an artistic project, as an enrichment to the instrumental influence of the director/writer.

The Piano represents an extreme case study of Campion's adaptation politics: it is a rare example of *ad hoc* novelisation from a screenplay: Campion wrote the novel *The*

Piano (1994) in partnership with writer Kate Pulinger. In this case, the film-to-book enterprise has the look of a writing stunt conceived in the attempt to further monetise the critical success and global visibility in the aftermath of the prize stockpiling in the US and Europe. Simultaneously, the novelization exacerbated the ambiguous correlation between *The Piano* as a film and an existing, unacknowledged literary source, thus creating an interesting precedent with regards to the legal underpinnings binding literary estates and film production houses: the heirs of Jane Mander complained publicly over Campion's alleged plagiarism of her 1920 novella *The Story of a New Zealand River*. Campion eventually acknowledged the reference, albeit she rejected the obvious links that would tie it to her filmic work and neither, to my knowledge, did she comment on the unusual presence of virtually similar literary works, tethered by a complex crossing of references. Tinknell's main argument, in *Jane Campion and Adaptation*, with regards to Campion's sources, is that her retrieval of tropes needs be situated at an earlier period than the anglophone nineteenth century, since it is the ostensibly anonymous folktale mythologies passed along as the "oral database" of European traditions that Campion is working in and drawing from. A canon, Tinknell stresses, that is inherently open to reworking and reshuffling, and, crucially, cannot be linked to an individually embodied form of authorship. Campion's authorial operation, therefore, would situate itself within a system of intellectual commons, in which, on the one hand, anonymity plays a significant role and, on the other, the survival of the entire corpus depends on appropriative re-telling. Tinknell posits how "Campion's creative reputation largely rests on her iconoclasm as a film-maker working both within and against the codes of art cinema as well as genre movies [...]" (70-1). Tinknell also discusses how each of her films simultaneously works within a specific tradition: melodrama and gothic for *The Piano*, the literary heritage drama for *The Portrait of a Lady*, a combination of biopic and painterly costume drama for *Bright Star* (70). However, in taking advantage of the conventionalities attached to those genres, Campion twists and restructures them in order to achieve impactful effects: "In each case, generic verisimilitude is both adhered to and ruptured by the use of a narrative structure, visual style or thematic emphasis that undercuts convention" (Tinknell 70). In *Portrait*, for instance, Isabel's word cards seem to double as speech bubbles, the vocabulary entries they show inform viewers'

understanding of the values Isabel ascribes to, or is fascinated by. The nickelodeon-inspired fragmentary short sequence, Isabel's travelogue interlude, provides comic relief, but also works as a summarising device to illustrate Isabel Archer's *grand tour*. The hallucinatory sequence of erotic delirium also counts as a precious insight into Isabel Archer's psychological state – albeit one framed as an intrusion – in stark contrast to the genre's adherence to “external” realism. Further interventions cause bigger reverberations within the very filmic form Campion is working in. For instance, the grayscale opening sequence posits the titular portrait as a group shot in motion, thus socializing and animating the conventional lone sitter, while simultaneously nodding at the semiotic tradition dictating the visual representation of female subjects. *Portrait*, as a film, does not exist in a vacuum, not merely because of its status as an adaptation from a novel. Osmond's use of Isabel's parasol to shield their kiss from the camera gaze not only imitates the spinning motion of the film projector, or the circular motion of early phenakistiscope animation discs, it is also a reprimanding gesture that disrupts the realist conventions not only of the period-piece drama, but of cinema itself, by recognising and negating viewer's omniscient curiosity (and control) over the filmic world. The diegetic action may be set in the 1870s, but Campion's intervention *can* construct, for her characters, and *visualise*, for her audiences, experiences of consciousness and understanding of the self using cinematic vocabulary (thus embracing the anachronism of a character unaccustomed to certain visual/narrative terms who projects their own story in cinematic forms). In a similar vein, *Portrait's* opening grayscale sequence arguably addresses the responsibility that cinema has come to acquire with respect to the education of its audiences: by providing them with countless scripts prescribing what makes a good love or a true marriage, it shaped the very meanings of the institutions and feelings it portrays. Anachronisms, therefore, disrupt the pretended isolation that each film attempts to conjure, rather than impact the narrative. On the contrary, delivery of meanings is faster since it relies on modern audiences' familiarity with different filmic conventions, rather than on their historiographic rigour. *Bright Star* similarly addresses a canonical subject matter – the life of Romantic poet John Keats – within an outwardly conventional filmic genre, the biopic. Campion, however, directs the formal layout of her film so as to include, and

gradually prioritise, the presence and influence of another real-life figure, in this case, Keats' betrothed Fanny Brawne, the neighbour he addressed as "My dear Girl", "My sweet Girl" in his epistolary to her. The surviving love letters between the couple are only Keats': Fanny's replies were destroyed by her descendants, thus granting Campion numerous blank spaces to fill in freely. The operation she embarked on with *Bright Star* presents a loose, composite approach to its sources: a scholarly biography of Keats (Andrew Motion's 1999 book *Keats*) is the unacknowledged foundation of the film, Campion's engagement with the original letters and poems is secondary, albeit more straightforward. Campion's heavy handed interpretation of Keats starts with her chronological selections: likely out of uninterest for a traditional hagiographic homage to a man of genius, Campion strictly frames Keats within the temporal thresholds of his meeting with Fanny Brawne in 1818 up to his untimely death in 1821. A very concise bracket, which Campion employs as a magnifying lens over Keats' philosophical transmutation of his love feeling from abstract to experience to creative impulse. Most importantly, Campion distorts her elected timeframe in order to carve out space for Fanny: her role as muse is instantly discarded to favour her presence as a full-fledged creative in her own right. Campion's production dedicates a vast amount of screen time, close-ups and portrait shoots to Fanny and her activities of choice: dressmaking, sewing and embroidery. The fact that Campion may have used "Keats biopic" as an authoritative bait to draw in serious readers of serious literature, only to serve them with colourful ribbons decorating a tale of girly infatuation and heartbreak, is indicative of her devotion to ironic reversals in narrative perspectives. "Canonicity, alongside a strong presence in the popular cultural imagination, might almost be viewed as a required feature of the raw material for adaptation and appropriation" (152) argues Julie Sanders in the chapter she dedicates to "rethinking the nineteenth century" in *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2016): Campion's appropriation of one among many historiographies about Keats, his time and place, his intellectual value, may – as I will discuss later in the chapter section – have sparked discontentment among scholarly communities, but, I will argue, provides a highly original intelligible commentary on her subject matter. Campion's facilitating intervention succeeds in highlighting aspects of "the story" that are customarily excluded from authoritative evaluations of literary history: the

unrecorded daily management that sustains, albeit invisibly, creative work; the possibility of artistic forms that are alternative, or complementary to sanctioned ones. Campion's keen eye, and her array of signature visual choices (zoomed-in detail shots are primary narrative and contextual statements) build a "derivative" work that arguably is able to triangulate the categories of adaptation that Imelda Whelehan and Deborah Cartmell describe in *Adaptations: from Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (1999): transposition, commentary and analogue (24). With *Bright Star*, her latest costume adaptation to date, Campion creates a hybrid adaptation that, simultaneously, translates with accuracy the content from a constellation of sources (biographical dates are strictly respected, poems are recited aloud in their unabridged version); comments on their significance by altering or supplementing the original texts with original in (witty drawing-room conversations about the nature of poetry and leisure are paratexts); and eventually creates an "analogue", using Keats' "original" story as "a point of departure" (Whelehan and Cartmell 24) to imagine Fanny's unrecorded life. Each of the following sections elaborates on the visual and narrative strategies I sketched so far, starting with a discussion of the nonlinear coexistence of sources, in terms of plot, costume, tacit underpinnings, within *The Piano* as an original filmic work.

2.2. *The Piano*, Literariness as Imperialism

Jane Campion's adaptation practice encompasses several titles in her filmography. Her inter-media translation favours a seemingly heuristic, outstretched and multi-sourced approach to source texts and the anglophone literary tradition of the nineteenth century. Works such as *The Piano* (1993) and *Bright Star* (2009), and, to a certain extent, also *An Angel at My Table* (1990) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1996), do not maintain direct, unequivocal ties with a single work of literary fiction. Deb Verhoever describes Campion, in her eponymous 2009 essay, as "a director of bookish credibility" (66), whose literary sources tend to be manifold and are ordered in a system that "privilege[s] the interpretation and the chain of interpretations" (66) over, conceivably, the primacy of the plotline. The intent, Verhoever claims, is akin to "a divestiture of personal authority" (66). The adaptation of a specific, yet unacknowledged literary canon appears rooted in culturally-bound ideas of such texts, rather than in the material wording of those very

texts. Campion seems to transpose her sources in ways that encompass and exceed intermedial translations of plot, fabulistic style and character. Whether a parallel comparison between Campion's visual narratives and the textual counterparts she hints at is viable depends on the features under exam. In terms of narrative voice, focus and scope, character presentation and insight, the description of place, landscape, nature and social identity, Campion consistently carves out space to explore what she needs the film to highlight, rather than pay service to the source. Adaptations that call for a distinctly historical setting, such as *The Piano*, appear similarly constructed by evocation rather than through direct transposition. Campion's quaint ambiances and "costume" heroines seem linked to a fuzzy repository of recognizable items that single out the "pastness" of her subjects, the distinctly "Victorian"³⁸ streak informing the narrative instances at stake, the distinct otherness of the whole filmic experience. Overall, Campion's use of time-specific props and trinkets as chronological and characterial signifiers is a careful balancing act between, on the one hand, her adherence to film and historical conventions and, on the other hand, her brisk, often ironic rejection of the same set of givens.

As a starting point, this section tackles the cinematic specifics of Campion's visual aesthetics in *The Piano*, specifically how the notion of "costume" exceeds the sartorial realm and becomes a visual tool that Campion uses to shape up narrative and bend genre conventions. The section subsequently moves on to assess the relationship of loose affinity between *The Piano* and its literary sources, both acknowledged and unacknowledged. Despite its status as an original screenplay, *The Piano* is heavily related to classic and popular works of British literature such as Brontëan *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and, arguably, *Villette*, as well as the lesser known title *The Story of a New Zealand River* by Jane Mander. Overall, this section tentatively explores – restraining from the statement of definitive answers – how Campion's heavily crafted

³⁸ I am using the term "Victorian" in a purposefully inaccurate way, as an umbrella term for "details pertaining to or reminding of the nineteenth century" rather than as an allusion to the strictly chronology of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901), thus suggesting a range of stances pertaining to the obsolescence and historical otherness of the era existing on a parallel binary with the film audiences' times.

and “prettified” screen elaboration of scenes and characters’ appearances influences narrative structures in *The Piano*. It will advance hypotheses as to whether the refined and dainty aesthetics of costume films can reiterate, highlight or hide problematic attitudes on screen, such as unchallenged gendered domestic roles and norms, as well as standardized forms of femininity. For instance, *The Piano* raises a variety of points with regards to the depiction of natural and anthropized territories in Campion’s landscape profiles and frames, how her continuous shifts from “authentic” representation to artistic licenses³⁹ fosters a selective historiography, one in which the representation and/or appropriation of Māori symbolism covers, and possibly erases, the violent history of colonization in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa.

While *The Piano* problematises upfront the genre conventions of romance narratives, it also laterally tackles the “nostalgia trap” that is enmeshed with the escapist mode of conventional period pieces. Given that love passions recur as the key subjects in Campion’s films, *The Piano* arguably presents itself as a full-fledged inquiry into the (artificial) logic behind socially-bound and socially-restrictive passions: the divide between nineteenth century moral and juridical norms and present-day post-feminist ethics is acted out so as to fully highlight the gap. Within that chronological bracket, Campion’s interest in depicting forms of transgression materialises in visual representations of conventionality in social behaviours and its emotional regulators. Through Ada, Campion reifies ideas about the Victorian body, especially by means of costume fashion, and embeds narrative conflict in personal objects that tell ideas (that the viewer registers as obsolete, historical and/or appropriate for their time) about privacy, shame, propriety, fear and fixed gendered hierarchies. “In time she’ll become affectionate” whispers Aunt Morag (Kerry Walker) to console Stewart (Sam Neill) as she observes Ada’s (Holly Hunter) hostile behaviour towards her new husband and household: Ada’s muteness grants Campion the space to craft her protagonist’s

³⁹ Leonie Pihama expresses her unease with Campion’s methodology in her essay “Ebony and Ivory. Constructions of Māori in *The Piano*” collected in Harriet Margolis’ anthology *Jane Campion’s “The Piano”* (2000). Campion’s selective approach to native Māori people, specifically by means of “conflicts between notions of authenticity and artistic license” (131), creates a visual portrait of national identity that undermines and downsizes the share of native Māori.

conflictual presence as a pantomime of composed anxiety. Besides conflict, Campion also explores other affective states – either impecunious desires or accumulative postures – by means of material props: practices of bargaining, buying and gift-giving in *The Piano* make up as much of the economic layout of the plot as of the sentimental and legal webs that characters build among each other.

The Piano is the story of a mute Scottish woman, Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), whose father marries her off to a man she has never met, George Stewart (Sam Neill), a settler in New Zealand. Ada sets off with her young daughter, Flora (Anna Paquin), and her beloved piano. Stewart's friend and collaborator, Alisdair Baines (Harvey Keitel), acquires the piano for himself and "bribes" Ada into giving him music lessons. His true plan, however, is to allow Ada to bargain the piano back, one key at a time, by letting him do "things [he] likes" while she plays. Through their forced intimacy, Ada and Baines develop an authentic attachment to one another. Stewart soon discovers their affairs, but only punishes Ada for her betrayal: he chops off her index finger – so as to hinder any future piano-playing – in the presence of her daughter. Ada and Baines eventually manage to leave Stewart's estate, they marry and resettle in the New Zealand town of Nelson, where Ada resumes playing music thanks to a prosthesis, and tentatively starts to speak again.

In a 1993 interview with Miro Bilbrough for *Cinema Papers*, when asked if she felt she had "brought a twentieth-century feel to this period in [her] attitude to these aspects", Campion replied:

If I didn't bring a twentieth-century perspective to it, I wouldn't be bringing anything. I would just be riding on the backs of great women. It's absolutely essential to try to understand the freedoms of today – not only the freedoms, but the questions that are real for us now; to try to create new insights for people today when we see others in a situation set in the 1850s. (Bilbrough qtd. in Wright Wexman 118)

Campion then goes on to list the ideas she set out to explore with *The Piano*, all of them pertaining to the realm of "romance and attraction", how those concepts become real and are talked about. Campion thus seems to draft a very specific epistemology of desire and its cultural signifiers, which she translates primarily into a haptic film

imaginary. In her book *Screening Novel Women* (2008), Liora Brosh draws compelling links between the subject matter of 1990s “costume” cinema and the themes trending in the feminist debate of the time. Brosh argues that two diverging lines are simultaneously developed in movies marketed for female audiences: women characters as victims of the patriarchal order on the one hand, and as empowered individuals on the other (118). This seems especially true of Campion’s *The Piano*, whose mute protagonist is bought, shipped and housed on occupied soil as yet another commodity by her husband, but is also unruly and jittery enough to kick back her way towards a bittersweet ending, a marriage to a man who, supposedly, loves her as his equal. Early 1990s cinema’s brand of empowerment, Brosh argues, seems especially crafted to assuage cultural tensions related to topics such as domestic violence and segregation (Brosh 124, 128). The “adaptation” device is useful insofar as it insists on the historical split between viewers and subject matter, so as to bring forth forms of escapist and consolatory discourse: 1990s women, unlike film characters, *can* recognise and often *do* name gendered abuse on screen. In Brosh’ analysis, the historical past becomes a setting where women’s subaltern social status exists unambiguously, the violence they suffer is decidedly sexist, their voicelessness is explicit (Brosh 130), whereas post-feminist society has developed subtler, invisible forms of cultural sexism. Films like *The Piano*, therefore, purportedly exist in order to provide viewers with commercially viable forms of solace, and the result of opposing narrative drives is, Brosh argues, a positive and female-oriented depiction of lives that strategically employ nineteenth century literary tropes to construct “special, treasured, *corseted*” (119) forms of (heterosexual) desire. Campion’s active employment of diminutive and constraining devices is wide and multifaceted. It ranges from Ada’s squealing “voice of the mind”, to her post-traumatic muteness. It surfaces in the cute and weird presence of children, made visible especially through their shrill voices – a sort of eerie echolalia – as they consistently interrupt adult’s narratives and conversations, or even subvert them to invent new ones from scratch, like Ada’s daughter Flora does. In *Piano* Campion composes an articulate vocabulary of human vocal sounds that are borderline non-verbal: their acoustics inhabit a liminal soundscape between animal cry, onomatopoeic interjection and unintelligible human language. Britta Sjogren’s study *Into the Vortex: Female Voice and Paradox*

(2006) argues for an understanding of sound, specifically female voices, as a “marker of difference” (3) in film narratives that employ asynchronous human voice non merely as a covering top-layer imposing verbal meaning, but, on contrary, to insert and foster contradictory, paradoxical and alternative meanings to the main narrative line. Sjogren selects a range of case-studies that privilege male authorship, still her definition of “voice-off” – a lexical as well as theoretical twist on “voice-over” – seems pertinent to Campion’s employment of Ada’s voice as an absent presence throughout *The Piano*. Sjogren’s dedication to explore “the ‘other side’ of the voice: its grain, its difference, its *non-sense*” (17) is, crucially, sustained by her notion that a technical/narrative device like voice-over can produce an amplifying effect, through voice-off, of the “evocation of a heterogeneous consciousness, of a self that is also other” (17). Moreover, when the “off” voice is gendered as female, its liminal, ambiguous position between diegetic invisibility and extra-diegetic presence comments, at once implicitly and expressly, on womens’ relevance as visible, political members of the social world the film depicts. Kaja Silverman’s 1988 study *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* addresses the cinematic use of human voices as an analytic tool akin to psychoanalysis, specifically, Silverman describes the “maternal voice” as a trope stylized from a “powerful cultural fantasy” (72). A mother’s speech, singing, mumbling and shouting is a “sonorous envelope” (72). While Ada’s muteness is far from being a form of silence – her own note-writing and Flora’s simultaneous interpretation from sign language to English provided by Flora⁴⁰ provide plentiful insight into her agency and

⁴⁰ I am unqualified to verify whether Holly Hunter’s gestural vocabulary in her actorial performance corresponds to genuine English Sign Language (either British SL, ASL, Auslan or New Zealand SL). The paradoxical streak in the full, perhaps excessive intelligibility of Ada’s expression that is potentially available to speakers of one (or more) English-related sign languages is not lost on me, and it would be interesting to understand how the fruition of the film (and plot) differs. On the other hand, an artificial sign language made up of arbitrary gestures, meaningless to anyone inasmuch as they are artificial, could raise controversial stances with regards to a potentially ableist mimicry of a full-fledged language for mere visual and narrative effect. In a 2003 interview with Sandra Hebron for *The Guardian*, however, Holly Hunter describes in detail how she prepared for the role of Ada before production. It is interesting to note how Hunter aligns piano-playing and sign language as the foremost characterial features she needed to acquire as skills in order to create Ada as a whole, besides crafting her communication style:

expression – the “lack” of acoustic presence might prove an interesting departure from the “fantasy of origins” concerning “pre-cultural sexuality, about the entry into language, and about the inauguration of subjectivity” (74) that Silverman inscribes in the sonorousness of maternal vocal conceptualization. The idea of the mute mother only surfaces in Silverman’s discussion of Julia Kristeva’s own treatment of the subject in *Desire in Language* (in which, however, she primarily deals with media that, unlike cinema, are still and silent by default, such as painting). “Kristeva’s insistence upon the split nature of motherhood leads to much the same result, since in the final analysis it is always the mother-as-genetrix rather than the mother-as-speaking-subject who commands her interest” (Silverman 112). Campion’s fantasy of silent motherhood, as she reifies it in *The Piano*, could not be more different from the symbolic, quasi-archetypal muteness that Silverman, via Kristeva, describes. “If the mother is mute, she is also irrecoverable” (Silverman 112): Ada is, on the contrary, only physically unvocal, the whole film narrative set up around her so as to make her fully recoverable, central beyond her status as mother, via her relationship with her daughter. Ada’s mutism is presented as distinctly body-related – in keeping with general ideas that ascribe aphasia to organic, psychological and/or neurological factors – as well as an act of will on Ada’s part, a stark refusal to partake in the world through speech (see fig. 1).

For *The Piano*, I did a lot of work because it was absolutely necessary. I don’t do sign language, and there was no sign language in 1850 – there was no sign language anywhere that was formal. There were alphabets but there was no American Sign Language or British Sign Language. There were elements that were already happening, so I had to make up a sign language. And I hired an American Sign Language interpreter, and she and I together created these signs that looked good in my hands that I felt I could master, so that I’d look like I’d been signing all of my life. And then I had to take piano lessons and learn the music that Michael Nyman, the composer, had written. So between those two activities, for about three or four months before shooting, I was engaged in a daily process of learning music and learning another language. And through those means, I felt that I was bringing the character out and that I was going more and more into that world. Just by virtue of the externals, by learning these two skills, I felt when we started shooting that I was ready. (Hebron)



Fig. 1. Ways to communicate in *The Piano*: sign language, music as performance and education, writing, drawing, carving. It is interesting to notice how the titular piano functions as the primary referent, medium and often the very subject of most of the communicative exchanges in the film.

Overall, the significance of Ada’s body as a site of physical suffering, whether through illness, injury or disability, raises pivotal ideas concerning Campion’s ableist treatment of her subject matter (and character subject). Disability in *The Piano*, however, seems rooted in historical verisimilitude: professional or accomplished female piano-player would often boast a physical deformity, handicap (such as blindness or muteness) or otherwise mere plainness, as Christine Knight notes:

The insistence by writers and historians on the woman pianist’s failure to ‘measure up’ physically suggests a cultural imperative to defuse the ideological threat posed by these women’s transgressive musical behaviour – accomplished discursively by denying such women’s wholeness, and hence their value as women in the sexual economy. (30)

Still, Knight's understanding of the disability trope in *The Piano* is metaphorical, and fully contingent to the film's rationale, rather than a characterial feature *per se*: "Ada's continuing disability serves to defuse the threat posed by her invasion of the male musical sphere" (30). I remain unconvinced by Knight's treatment of illness (albeit a voluntary condition as Ada's obstinate refusal to speak, or even her prosthetic finger) as metaphor, the ableist implications in ascribing a purpose to a physical state, I argue, are redundant and inappropriate to the description of the film's operating mechanisms, as well as potentially demeaning to the condition of disability in and of itself. In her essay "Vulnerable Bodies: Creative Disabilities in Contemporary Australian Film" (anthologized in *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, edited by Ian Craven), Liz Ferrier locates Campion's film in a thematic pattern customary of Australian film productions in the 1990s, a chain of motifs that are used causally in the film plot: visible or otherwise evident issues of disablement and/or vulnerability in the protagonist; a related situation of isolation or enforced separation from regular communities; a remarkable or exceptional creativity as well as a pronounced sensitivity (60). *The Piano's* Ada is described by Ferrier as "perhaps the limit case of the disabled-artist figure so prominent in the cycle" (59) and her piano-playing is seen as a "compulsive" activity in which she, however, manages to find "redemption". Ferrier, however, seems to only take into account Ada's post-violence physical state – she mentions the "grotesque" silver finger that Baines crafts for her (59) – as indicative of disability, not Ada's (selective) muteness. The "fleshy" forms of disability are rendered by Campion in "aestheticising depictions", which eschew the grotesque and stimulate sympathy (Ferrier 59-60). As Campion herself stresses: "There is no sense of her as a handicapped person, however. It is almost as though she treats the world as if it were handicapped. At the same time there is a great deal of suffering from this position" (interview with Miro Bilbrough, *Cinema Papers* 93, May 1993, qtd. in Ferrier 60). Campion's portrayal of neurological difference can also be integrated in Ferrier's framework: author Janet Frame's biopic *An Angel at My Table* fully engages with Frame's history of mental illness psychiatric disorder, and blends in with the narrative propulsion aiming at establishing her success as a writer. Creativity and sensitivity are cast, in Campion's work, as akin to conditions falling short of neurotypical status, not just psychological conditions, but traits such as naivety or shyness.

Moreover, they are framed as successful ways out the isolation, tools of redemption and as well as self-expression. Campion's tendency to blunt, often prettify (ostensibly, to romanticise) uncomfortable and taboo topics, such as life with disability, interpersonal violence, control by means of menace and bodily harm, etc., is, foremost, a narrative practice, but its main signposts are visual cues pertaining to the "feminine", either as objects that serve functions related to women's gender performance, or as specific uses and effects of the feminine-coded body.

The teleological dimension in Campion's filmography, moreover, is not clear-cut, and is not always neatly positive: happy endings may be conventional in their structure, but ambiguous in their politics. Costume provides contextual potentiality: as Campion states in a 1993 interview with Marli Feldvoss, *The Piano* "had to be a costume film for the gothic romantic genre but also the time itself" (qtd. in Wright Wexman 97). Campion understands costume film, specifically one set in New Zealand, as a sort of "inheritance", given that the 1850s are historicised as the time of colonisation in New Zealand. The presence of unequivocally "British", "Victorian" feminine fashion signifiers in a colonial setting, therefore, is especially striking: the juxtaposition of pretty dresses and occupied land is a jarring reminder that constrictive, impractical attire is not the only form of bodily control and subordination of specific identity groups. Hunter's performance, moreover, is largely responsible for Ada's idiosyncratic blend of emotional restlessness and hieratic presence, which, I argue, dilates the boundaries of feminine restraint beyond recognizability. In the aforementioned interview with Marli Feldvoss, Campion states that "Ada had become a myth to me" (qtd. in Wright Wexman 100), a unique figure that could not be integrated in either traditional or radical narratives. She also considers how Hunter's work is greatly responsible for Ada's back turn into a down-to-earth figure, thus adding "realness" to the story. In fact, when the interviewer mentions Campion's alleged original idea for a "Frida Kahlo type" actress to be cast for Ada's role, Campion comments how Holly Hunter's aspect and performance are absolutely contradictory with respect to that original idea. "I made a sharp turn when I got acquainted with Holly Hunter and as a result I decided for a totally different kind of 'small' power that I liked about her" (qtd. in Wright Wexman 100). Campion's appreciation for "smallness" seems to also emerge in the series of little, nice-looking

material signifiers: tiny, “cute” objects that cinch, clasp and gird. *The Piano* is arguably the best example in Campion’s filmic practice of her penchant for the close inspection of objects that are small, light and easy to handle. Literary theorist and historian Sianne Ngai has produced extensive work on those she names “marginal aesthetic categories”, and her understanding of the multi-layered feelings and meanings connected to the idea of “cuteness” is central to this discussion. It is important to stress that Ngai does not intend the aesthetic categories she analyses as universal, rather, she frames them – ideologically and historically – in a strictly capitalist paradigm.⁴¹ The key intuition in Ngai’s treatment of aesthetic categories is the description of their intersubjective capacities: the fact that specific ways of relating to other subjects is also embedded within an aesthetic stance. Ngai’s critique focuses on forms of desire directed at “objects already regarded as familiar and unthreatening” (3). Ngai defines “cuteness”, or rather, the specific attitude to cute objects, as “not just an anesthetization of powerlessness, evoking tenderness for ‘small things’ but also, sometimes, a desire to belittle or diminish them further” (3). She further notes how “cute things evoke a desire in us not just to lovingly molest but also to aggressively protect them” (Ngai 4). This dual outcome is also particularly enlightening when it comes to understanding Campion’s key employment of specific objects to foster, underline, criticise certain relations and bonds happening among characters. To take minute details also into account when analysing a work of filmic fiction means to also dignify the endearing and the crushable: what is most interesting to me is how Campion combines this affective and semiotic two-facedness to bring forth specific meanings: is the horror of a “cutified” prison less daunting? Do those streaks of uneasiness peeping through dainty clothes work as political commentary? In another 1993 interview, this time with Thomas Bourguignon and Michel Ciment for *Positif* magazine, Campion discusses how the shadowy bush in *The Piano* is her attempt to recreate in “submarine colours” (Bourguignon qtd. in Wright Wexman 106) a

⁴¹ My employment of Ngai’s definitions is meant as a supportive parenthesis rather than a foundational principle informing my discussion. Ngai binds her arguments to specific examples from both Eastern and Western cultural forms – albeit her theoretical reference framework is primarily Western-centric – and situates her discussion within the chronological boundaries of the twentieth century.

place so wild and troubling to the first settlers who landed on Aotearoa that “they tried to ‘clean [it] up’” (Bourguignon qtd. in Wright Wexman 106). She then comments:

Romanticism has been misunderstood in our era, especially in films. It has become something “pretty” or lovable. Its hardness, its dark side has been forgotten. I wanted to create a feeling of terror in the spectator when faced with the power of natural elements. (Bourguignon qtd. in Wright Wexman 106-7)

Campion employs visual signifiers of cuteness, smallness, tenderness in their literal meaning and function – ready examples, among others, are Ada’s notebook-necklace and her lace trousseau – yet she also twists them, either playfully or more radically, so that the contrasting wilderness and violence can look even sharper when thrust upon them, or cast beside/beneath them (see fig. 2). Ada’s pen-and-notebook necklace-like accessory hangs from her neck as a visible mark of her muteness, a physical condition that, however, has not succeeded in making her a demure and compliant lady. Ada uses her notebook necklace to furiously scribble orders on its round-edged mini sheets of paper: “The piano?”, she asks on the beach; “The piano is mine. It’s mine!” she cries in the kitchen. Its centrality – it is, after all, at the centre of every Holly Hunter’s close-up – wanes off as the movie flows, its functionality is gradually superseded as Ada adjusts to her new surroundings and creates, together with her new family, original forms of mutual expression and comprehension that dispense of purely verbal/written linguistic systems. As the evolving function of some tiny objects illustrates, along with their user’s attitudes and patterns of use, corresponding changes in interpersonal dynamics, other objects emphasise, to varying effects, the sheer discontinuity between their intended use or intrinsic meaning and the clashing intentions of the person employing them. Ada’s lace trousseau is another example: her dainty wedding gown – its ribbons visibly greyed with dust, its lace yellowed in years of disuse – is worn on top of everyday clothing and loosely fastened up at the back. It needs wearing, in fact, only in order to stage a souvenir picture of the Stewarts’ proxy marriage, and on a day of pouring rain no less, which makes Ada’s pout even stuffier.

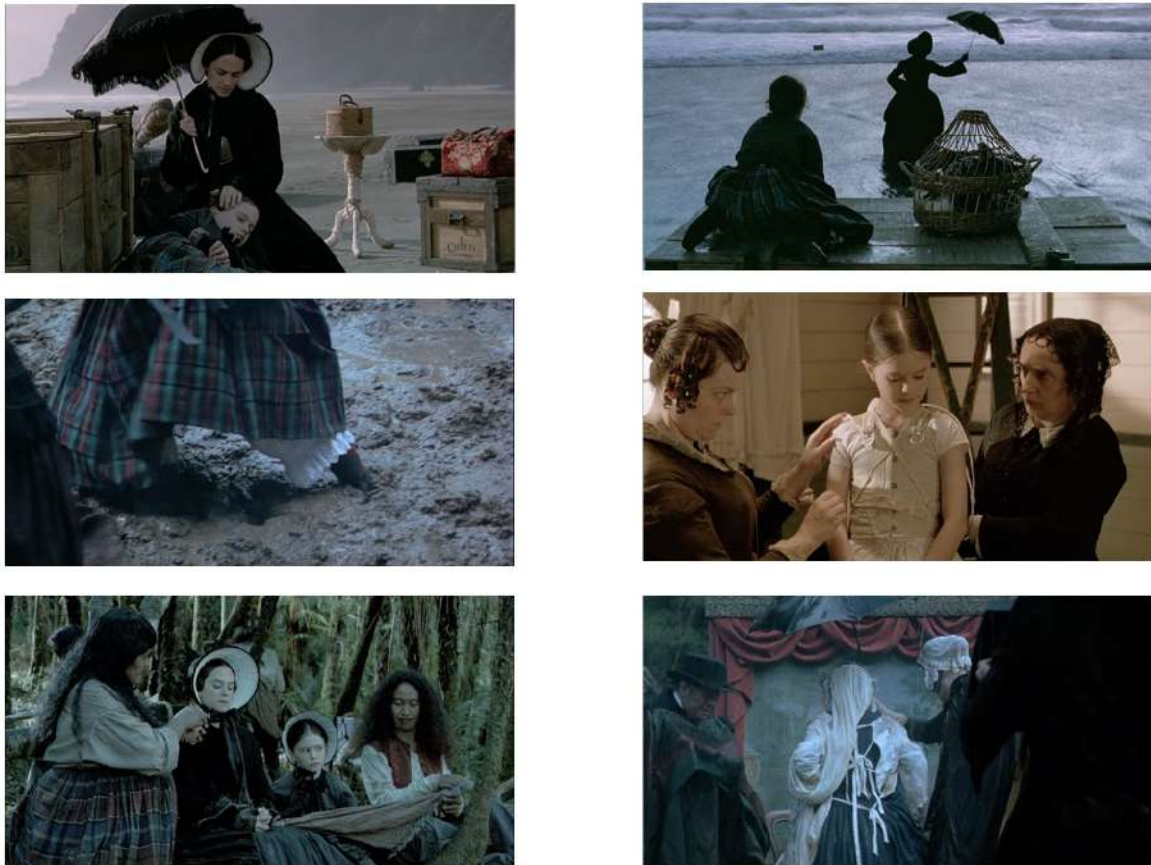


Fig. 2. Active uses of costume, as either narrative tool, character attribute and/or displaced, decontextualized signifier. Ada's parasol is a useless shield, then a comic hindrance. Undergarments for a little girl can be as constricting and fragile as a grown woman's. Ada's wedding dress indicates a role, suggesting a specific performance despite its unsuitable, ill-fitting features.

Objects that are unambiguous in their meaning, such as a bridal gown, help tell the story not only when their users (or wearers) play according to the part, they can set up a multiplicity of telling modes and characterizations when the wearer/carrier is shown fighting against them, tugging or pulling, wearing them with visible discomfort.

These objects bear a crucial role not only in Ada's gender performance, they also signal her class status and serve to historicise her public appearance. Renee Baert frames her discussion of film costume in her essay "Skirting the Issue" (1994) with a historical disclaimer: "The early nineteenth century is a cultural moment within which the importance of clothing as a signifier of class and profession or trade is superseded by

its assimilation to the intensive marking of sexual difference” (357). Baert’s essay is heavily informed by a psychoanalytic parlance that she uses to join instances of (cinematic) representation and fashion staples. Her understanding of period costume in contemporary film productions reads, essentially, as a material strategy that primarily visualises the character’s subconscious sexual realm:

[...] the female figure appears in the cinematic image as lure, fetish, spectacle and object of imaginary possession in a relay of looks that does not include her own. She is, in the now classic term, the to-be-looked-at, and what is most particularly on view is her clothing: it is a primary means through which her sexuality is symbolized. (Baert 357)

Whereas I acknowledge Baert’s insight with regards to the dual significance of costume – as clothing when naturalized within the narrative, as connotative element that fosters “the fetishized spectacle of the feminine” (360) – I argue, however, that the costume and set production as representational systems can encompass the sexual to include other compositional fragments within its denotative and connotative capabilities, especially in Campion’s cinema.

Campion employs objects as extended signifiers throughout the movie: Ada’s crinoline, for instance, appears recurrently out of its sartorial context, both as a symbolic cage and a literal shelter. Starting in the 1850s onwards, the fashion for stiffened petticoats started being swiftly replaced by lighter crinolines worn under one’s dress: skirts gradually became fuller and wider, as, crucially, steel hoops could more freedom of movement to the wearer compared to wooden or whalebone traditional alternatives, and also called for complementary shorter (and possibly looser) corsets (Chrisp 14-5). Ada’s costumes are in keeping with the most recognizable sartorial trend of the time Campion attempts to recreate: Ada is frozen in the fashion moment right before bustles with padded cushions and tightly laced shaped corsets (to be worn under long trailing dresses) became in vogue in the 1860s until the end of the nineteenth century (Chrisp 52-3). Her geographical isolation, moreover, further shields her from any echo of the dress reform movements, which also spread from the 1850s onwards, along with the practical, comfortable, simplified “rational dresses” they advocated for. Still, the ideal of beauty, respectability and class that Ada adheres to with her clothes becomes the

space that the film intends to overturn, and is able to. The interior life and private times that Campion is especially interested in are usually shown in tandem with the undressing of characters, as their clothes are turned upside-down and their undergarments are momentarily discarded for the night, or for a moment of privacy. *The Piano*'s iconic beach sequence seems to reify Campion's pretty and wholesome aesthetic direction: mother and daughter playing together – to Michael Nyman's iconic theme – Flora dancing on the seaside with ribbons in her petticoat, then drawing a huge seahorse in the sand as Baines watches affectionately. I want to focus, instead, on the *other* beach scene, the sequence depicting Ada and Flora's landing after their tiresome journey from Scotland. As the day's light gradually dims, the sailors unload Ada, Flora and their belongings on a wild, empty beach and proceed towards their final destination, the city of Nelson, leaving the pair completely alone. Campion mitigates the atmosphere of sheer distress by assembling an inventive image of motherly care, thus sparing audiences from sharing the experience of utter abandonment faced by the protagonists. An abrupt cut right after the sailor's departure, as Ada and Flora stand motionless on the beach, opens on mother and daughter's makeshift shelter arrangements for the night: they propped open one of Ada's crinolines and are lying beneath it as if it were a tent (see fig. 2). A light cloth shields them further from the external environment, mother and daughter tell each other stories and cast shadows with a candlelight. The cosy arrangement manages to assuage the angst, the empty underskirt space is thus replenished rather than annulled from sight. A piece of feminine undergarment may be ingeniously repurposed as an outdoor shield at night, but in the morning its flimsy, cage-like structure is exposed, or rather, snatched away. The soft ambiance turns into a harsh public show when, the following drab early morning, Stewart and his team of native carriers arrive at the beach and start packing Ada's dowry, taking everything but the piano back home with them. Ada's crinoline makes further appearances in other key moments of the film, and, crucially, is always presented in some connection with Ada's male counterparts, Stewart and Baines (see fig. 3). For instance, the crinoline falls from its hook onto Stewart's head as he's interrupting Ada's and Flora's bedtime chatter; but in its subsequent comeback it is dutifully tied to Ada's waist as she's taking off her multi-layered robe in order to lie next

to Baines “with no clothes on”, as he requested. Stewart tugs and drags at the crinoline when he is forcibly trying to prevent Ada from reaching Baines’ cabin in the woods, while Baines carefully and competently lifts it when kneeling in front of Ada right before their sex scene.

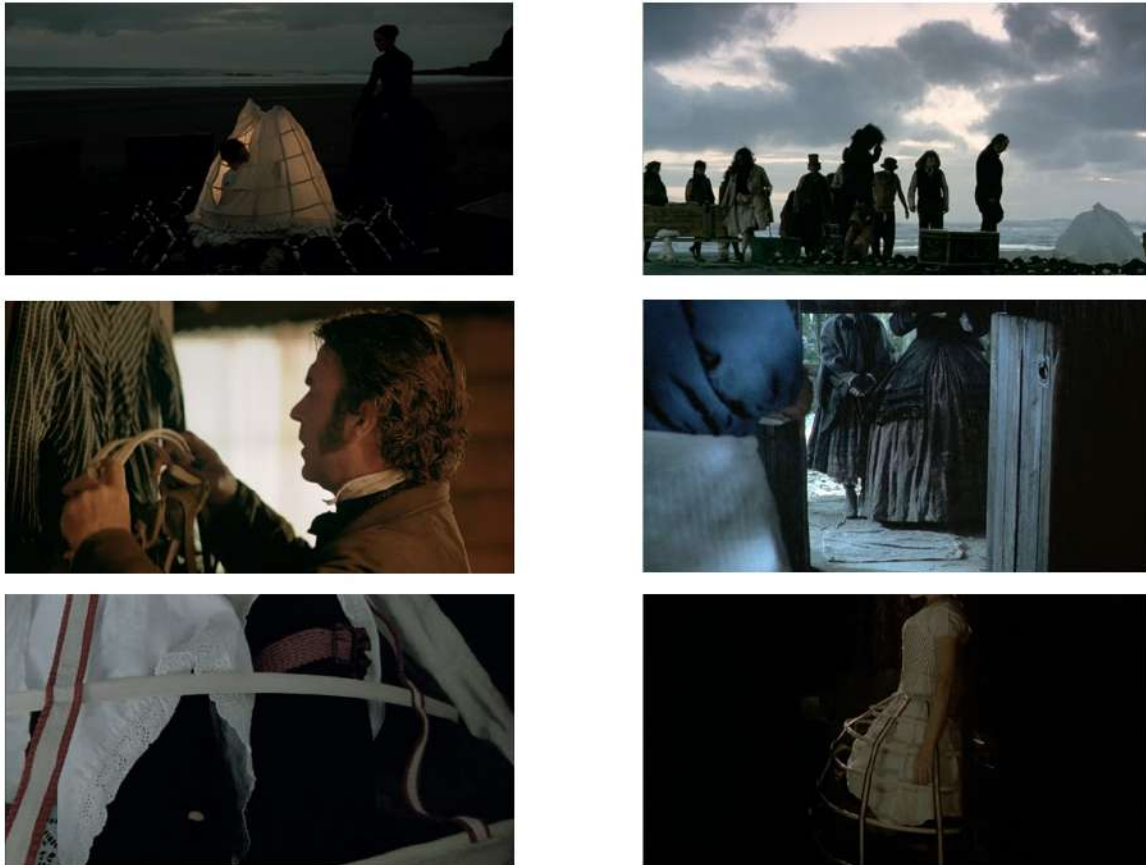


Fig. 3. Instances of crinolines: the tent-shelter on the beach, the inactive object falling from its hook, the active object hidden under layers of skirts, the object made visible as it maintains its function on the feminine body.

Campion’s rotation of violence and affection is attentively balanced and explicitly signalled, with the help, among others, of material, character-related props. In her essay “Tempestuous Petticoats: Costume and Desire in *The Piano*” (1995) Stella Bruzzi similarly overviews Campion’s active employment of crinoline hoops as a visual and narrative signifier. Clothes do not exhaust their function as mere coverage: Bruzzi suggests that Ada, via Campion, exerts and maintains control of her predicament

primarily through the choice of her costume, which, however, is consistently employed as an instrument implementing other functions.

The hoops, at the outset, offer a protective tent; later, exposed during the sex scene between Ada and Baines, the crouching Baines (unlike Stewart) is permitted under the hoops; and finally as Ada is pulled under the water with the piano her silhouetted hoops almost get in the way of her disentangling her foot. (Bruzzi 263)

Specifically, Bruzzi posits the crinoline as the meeting point resulting from the triangulation of individual (self)representation, contextual conventions, the expression and/or sublimation of desire (specifically of sexual nature) (257-8). Costume as mediator for sexual desire – either from the desiring subject outwards, or directed at the subject via fetishistic, objectifying, or voyeuristic tensions) – is Bruzzi’s main area of inquiry.

The complex reworkings of gender stereotypes in *The Piano* are located within costume, the film ultimately advancing a feminist discourse of clothes that neither absents the body nor simply reinforces traditional interpretations of the feminine. There is an imposed distance between clothes, intended to contain or camouflage, and sexuality [...]. (Bruzzi 259)

The fact that the impractical crinoline hoops are the only barrier hindering Stewart from raping Ada in the woods is not lost on Bruzzi: heavy Victorian costumes convey meaning visually (such as Ada’s status and respectability) but are also material players in the characters’ interactions, they elicit paradoxical meanings (Ada’s handling of her skirts is the foremost indicator of her sexual consent, or lack thereof), their function as objects is a perpetually floating one. “Womanliness as masquerade” (262) in *The Piano*, Bruzzi argues, is a language that allows great liberty in terms of double-entendre to the wearer of hooped skirts, whom can solidify gender expectations *and* work from within sartorial conventions to stretch the rigidity of her predicament. However, Bruzzi warns against radical readings of *The Piano*’s manifest crinolines: “It is not simplistically indicated that hooped skirts have suddenly acquired liberating potential: they still hamper progress through interminable mud and prevent Aunt Morag from easily

relieving herself when ‘caught short’” (262). Besides, I add, *Campion* is prone to work with visual signifiers that exceed the costume department, and grant full responsibility to the actor’s body as a provider of primary narrative meaning.

Ada’s hands exist as autonomous props as well as Ada’s bodily appendix: they play the piano, of course, they form the signs she uses to communicate, they operate as signifiers of femininity and class. Ariel Beaujot’s study of women’s costume *Victorian Fashion Accessories* (2012) focuses on the ubiquity of gloves as visual statements that bear much more information about the wearer than her mere sense of style. By looking at gloves, Beaujot spends a considerable amount of attention on the hands themselves, their appearance and the movements they are expected to make: her observations help contextualise the period-feel that *Campion* achieves, and simultaneously bends to the necessities of her plot.

In fashion plates none of the objects are grasped firmly; in fact, most accessories depicted in women’s hands are barely held at all. The fans are not being waved, nor are the parasols positioned directly over heads or leaned on for support. These images helped demonstrate to women that they must not use their hands for work, or even for holding objects of women’s apparel too firmly, if they were to have the perfect hand. The limp hand gestures reminded onlookers of the female passivity and weakness apparently engaged in by noble women. (Beaujot 41)

Historically, Beaujot argues, hands are the primary indicator of individual breeding and education besides, most importantly, one’s class identity. The visual and symbolic importance of hands, especially women’s, goes in tandem with the significance of hands-related accessories, such as jewellery, parasols and fans, and especially gloves: “The glove was involved in the fabrication of Victorian femininity as various hand shapes were thought to represent different types of women” (Beaujot 32). Beaujot situates in the tension between the individual’s taste and choice of accessories and the fashion conventions of their time the source of “self-fashioning”, namely the idea that “one would create the impression of an inner personality through one’s outward look and behaviour” (34). The mundane, menial control of one’s outward bodily appearance, therefore, is akin to (and a preamble to) one’s performance of the class *and* gender ideal they wish, or are bound to project. I argue that *Campion* is profoundly aware of this

mechanism, specifically in its Victorian shift from “conduct-oriented to consumer-oriented” quality (Beaujot 33): the operational, rather than cosmetic, presence of costume in *Piano* is a good indicator of its relevance. The titular piano is, as an object in an of itself, equally crucial as a signifier of gentility, refinement and domestic femininity. In her essay “Ada’s Piano Playing in Jane Campion’s *The Piano*” (2006) Christine Knight describes the increasing ubiquity of pianos in Victorian households throughout the nineteenth century and describes piano-playing as the foremost indicator of domestic harmony: music performed by girls and women indoor, in private, for the enjoyment of a selected circle that would not expect, nor wish, for a display of virtuosity. Piano-playing would require the performer’s body to position itself in a way that could still appear chaste: the face would not be disfigured as it would with orchestral instruments, the figure would not become provocative as it would by playing a cello (Knight 25). Devotion to the instrument, proficiency that could enable a woman to make a livelihood teaching piano lessons would all defeat the purpose of proper domestic musicality (Knight 24). Furthermore, Knight’s comments on the film’s symbolic and narrative employment of piano-playing touch on the very issues that motivated my interest in Campion in the first place:

The success of the film depends in large part on a post-psychoanalytic cultural responsiveness to the idea of individual agency expressed via the ‘true’ or essential inner life, as well as on a feminist ethic that has been established in the second half of the twentieth century on that very principle. At the same time, however, the viewer’s response to Ada’s quest for self-realisation is contingent upon recognition of the Victorian tradition of (feminine) gentility, which functions in the film as part of the repressive social apparatus thought to be hostile to Ada’s inner self. (Knight 27)

The primacy of feminine narrative lifelines is grounded in visual cultural signifiers that sustain the arguments favouring Ada’s prominence, while also providing intelligible context for the idiosyncratic material and symbolic transactions the film portrays. Ada’s hands are given prominence in Campion’s film for obvious reasons, they provide much (if not most) of her communicative inputs and reactions: they play the piano, they gesture linguistic signs, they touch bodies (her own and other people’s), use, grab and occasionally hurl objects (see fig. 4). Ada’s hands are never covered by conventional

gloves, she only protects herself with a fingerless pair of black halfgloves during her journey to New Zealand. She does not need to hide her hands, the manual labour she is required to do around Steward's house is taken care of by a crowd of helpful relations, which is in keeping with Beaujot's understanding of middle-class womanhood:

Women of the middle class were often prized for their fragility and the religious doctrine of the early Victorian period suggested that physical suffering, as well as cloistering in the home, refined a woman's character making her the strong moral center of the family. Both the images of the invalid mother and the upper-middle-class wife give the impression that middle-class women were not overly engaged in manual labor. (Beaujot 33)

This places Ada in a paradoxical status: her identity as a fragile upper-middle-class woman whose hands can remain idle, untainted by menial work, ready to be shown off as musical instruments in-and-of-themselves, is somewhat at odds with their unassuming appearance, firm grasp, stubby fingers, pragmatic nail-length, consistently bare and active. A lady's hands are "beautiful if they are shapely, finely made, and white, with blue veins, taper fingers, and rosy nails, slightly arched" notes Beaujot (31), while Ada's largely propel the advancement of the plot, and bear most of its consequences too, and quite literally so. *Campion's* material narrative, in fact, reaches its apex with the visual analogy between a white piano key and a bloodless finger. The significance of the finger as a nexus of significance is best explained via *Campion's* account of on-set preparations to take care of child-actor Anna Paquin's wellbeing. The prosthetic finger to be used while filming the chopping scene was purposely shown to Paquin, as *Campion* explains in a 1993 interview with Andreas Fuller: "The child had seen the artificial finger that we were using and liked it, just as she did all the gruesome things – more as a curiosity than as something horrifying" (qtd. In Wright Wexman 94). Furthermore, *Campion* clarifies that the violence of the scene, especially the chasing part, was broken down so as to become understandable to the child, its experience fully rehearsed beforehand: Paquin got to play her father role prior to shooting, and "chase *him* so as to rehearse and empathise with his role and understand the fictionality of it all" (Fuller qtd. in Wright Wexman 94).



Fig. 4. *Campion's hapticity by way of Ada's hands. Touch can be an individual experience for Ada (the feel of her own body, the active or lateral use of the piano) or a shared one (either a wanted touch or an uncomfortable, forced one).*

Furthermore, *Campion* clarifies that the violence of the scene, especially the chasing part, was broken down so as to become understandable to the child, its experience fully rehearsed beforehand: Paquin got to play her father role prior to shooting, and “chase *him* so as to rehearse and empathise with his role and understand the fictionality of it all” (Fuller qtd. in Wright Wexman 94). Indeed, the closing sequences are arguably the most emotionally-charged: Ada understands that her growing fondness for Baines must be revealed, and that realisation must be performed in a way that is at once symbolic and, necessarily, silent. Ada decides to remove one of the piano keys and carves love words – *Dear George you have my heart* – on its raw wooden side. She then wraps the piano key in a handkerchief, fastens it with a matching ribbon and entrusts her daughter

with delivering it to Baines. Campion's camera closely follows Ada's gestures and movements, the material, almost haptic focus she uses to fully describe the objects – piano key, cloth tissue, Ada's hands – purposefully turns into narrative motion after Flora decides to give her mother's secret gift to her step father instead. Stewart's reaction soon turns from utter bewilderment to his decision to act on his desire for revenge. In the film's most daunting scene, Stewart seizes Ada's wrists, hurls her against a log and chops off her index finger with an axe: Campion crafts the sequence so that it clearly appears that the sight of the tiny object offered as present is the detonator of the violent response, even if the abuse itself comes as no surprise.

The prompt reversal from tenderness to weak passivity is an ambiguity that Ngai sees as embedded in the very experience of cuteness. Strong, violent spillover is precisely the reaction unleashed by a symbolic object charged with sentimentality, the same brutal force that turns Ada's index finger into another small, vulnerable object, one that is literally made inert by chopping. Stewart's action makes Ada deformed and, in the immediate aftermath, powerless. What adds further layers of emotional response and meaning is the fact that Stewart immediately wraps Ada's severed finger in the same embroidered handkerchief the piano key came in, and instructs Flora with the same duty her mother charged her with: to take the ribboned gift to Baines. Campion then mirrors the earlier frames depicting Flora's solitary jumpy stroll up and down the property's hills, all while singing to herself and wearing a bouncy pair of wings: just as cute as she was before disobeying her mother, Flora can now fulfil Ada's wish – to have the small parcel delivered to Baines – but has to do so under pouring rain, muddy trails and weighed down by a pair of soaked wings. The reification of Ada's body parts into a displaceable object bears obvious consequences that stretch throughout the remaining narrative: the lack of a finger not only compromises Ada's ability to play the piano, but drastically reduces the range of her sign language proficiency.

Agustin Zarzosa makes a similar argument about the significance of piano-playing as primarily a mode of exchange and transaction rather than a tool of self-expression, or as a mediator of bodily connection. In his paper "Jane Campion's *The Piano*: Melodrama as Mode of Exchange" (2010), Zarzosa juxtaposes his observations about Campion's material visual strategies with her use of the genre conventions of melodrama –

“representational strategies” such as “plot twists, visual metaphors, strong emotionalism, extreme states of being” (396). The section titled “Things: the spirit is a finger” (400) develops Zarzosa’s argument about the performance of economic transaction as a melodramatic mode: while Ada’s agency as displayed in her participation in exchanges and bargaining acts throughout the film is morally ambiguous, and despite that fact that “the film identifies Ada’s true self with the piano by equating her missing voice and the piano’s music” (400), the notions of violence, duress and usurpation that *The Piano* is preoccupied with are not only expressed by its marriage plot(s). Marriage as a system of exchange is certainly amply discussed in the film by means of the parallel comparison of the diverging notions of couplehood – both heteronormative and legally binding, one based on equality of commitment, the other construed as a system that exchanges women in order to sustain male lineage and collaboration – but the economic framework Zarzosa proposes also highlights subsidiary forms of business in *The Piano*.

The film strictly opposes these gifts between Ada and Baines to Stewart’s exchange practices, in which he gets more than what he gives in return: he seems to get Ada for nothing in return; he gives the piano in exchange for land; he attempts to trade blankets and guns in exchange for the Maori’s sacred land; and he wants to trade buttons for the Maori’s labor. (Zarzosa 402)

The private transactions⁴² that push forth the narrative in *The Piano* encompass all the “occult realms of truth” (Zarzosa 403), such as artistic research and expression, natural landscape and communal living in a geo-specific location, and reifies them as potential

⁴² Mark A. Reid’s postcolonial reading of the film in “A Few Black Keys and Māori Tattoos: Re-reading Jane Campion’s *The Piano* in Post-Négritude Time” (collected in Margolis 2000) similarly detects the economic exchange as the foundational narrative rationale of the film, but he is explicit in his denomination of these transactions as illicit:

Stewart’s dismembering part of Ada’s finger is no less psychically brutal than is his partitioning of communal Maoriland for his individual possession. Baines is Stewart’s go-between in this brutal appropriation of lands and its people. Ada’s body is abused like the Maori landscape. Thus, when Stewart sells Ada’s piano to Baines, a piano that Ada not Stewart owns, the film introduces a system of fraudulent exchanges. (113)

(or ready-made) objects of possession, exchange, bargaining. Crinolines, piano keys and severed fingers are part of a whole system, a constellation of material devices, props and objects which, I argue, play a considerable role in shaping the narrative's scope and especially its tone, while also proving intrinsic political meanings that play out throughout the filmic narrative. Specific scenic props, moreover, gain visual and narrative relevance as markers of femininity, through time-specific sartorial fashion they evoke and imply gender and class politics that contemporary audiences can easily connect to standardized ideas of (now obsolete) "ladylikeness".

The underlying analytic device in the material appraisal of Campion's mise-en-scène, however, can also function for entire sequences, such as the "Bluebeard" theatre production put up by the settlers' children and its tragicomic turn of events when the native community misunderstands the mechanisms of fiction. This could also be an example of how the aesthetics of prettiness can reiterate, highlight or hide problematic attitudes on screen, such as a seemingly unobtrusive form of colonialism. The native Māori community's unawareness of the white audience's suspension of disbelief is used as a comedic bracket that further highlights the gap between white settlers and Māori natives as the latter are condescendingly explained what a theatre play is, and how it works, what need fiction and performance serve. Notions of clumsiness and simple evaluation thus tied to the Māori might foster their portrayal as secondary appendages to the main storyline – the white, heterosexual and piano-playing one. Another binary illustration of violence and tenderness in relationships worth considering is explored through Flora's uncanny bond with Baines' dog, who she first beats and pokes at with a stick, and later cuddles, thus performing a potentially problematic power dynamic between human and animal.

So far I have described Campion's human-centric, appearance-conscious visual strategies as pivotal in Campion's filmic practice, but I also maintain that her foremost site of expressivity with regards to the *adapting* mechanism is background, landscape and ambiance. Her treatment of the surroundings bespeaks the heuristic mode of her adaptive practice: the literary source is present, but quotation gives way to evocation, visual translation, thematic borrowing and juxtaposition of para-literary antecedents. Campion acknowledges her debt to a certain group of British literary text in interviews

given over the years, in which she describes her interest in mood rather than in plotlines. The Brontëan link is especially visible, specifically in Campion's rendition of nature and ambiance, which are adjacent, evocative of works such *Villette*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, rather than direct descendants of the novels. Sue Thornham, when describing Andrea Arnold's 2011 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, notes that "In cinema, the most immediate precursor of Arnold's film is Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), set at roughly the time that Brontë's novel was written and owing an explicit debt to it" (221). Specifically, ambient textures relating to harsh weather and bleak landscapes are the determining traits that Campion claims as influences and borrowings from her Brontëan source. Commentators consistently describe Campion's visuals as a supposedly "gothic" mode of representation, which is treated as a visible streak throughout her filmography, as noticed by Irène Bessière (in Radner 2009, 133), who also links gothic ambiances to a penchant for "psychological horror" in Campion's narratives. Stella Tincknell, moreover, points out deep links between Campion and the repository of oral folktales, especially those darker in tone and subject matter, in addition to the Brontës' influence (44-7). Tincknell goes as far as to describe Campion's peculiar "surrealist" style as a willful stretch towards an effect of uncanniness (45). On the other hand, the fascination with individual erotic desire that is a common assumption under many interpretative arguments about *Piano* seems to draw from a popular conceptualizations of the source texts as human and individual-centered. The results are intermedia parallels such as those listed in the interview with Andrew L. Urban titled "*Piano's* good companions" (qtd. in Wright Waxman 146): *Wuthering Heights* is described as a "powerful poem about the romance of the soul", whose bleak plot is akin to *The Piano's* "tragic tonality"; Campion's visual work becomes a "gothic exploration of the romantic impulse" whose primary effect is narrative-based, and centered on "the right for people to decide to follow their passions" (interview with Ruth Hessey qtd. In Wright Wexman 29).

Although the supposedly indirect literary sources are constantly acknowledged, by Campion herself as well as by press and academic commentators, the thematic similarities with Jane Mander's 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River* tend to be disregarded, especially now, almost thirty years to the debut of the film and, most likely,

because of the niche popularity of Jane Mander's biography and work. Mander's protagonist, newly-widowed Alice Roland, travels within New Zealand, upriver, to join her new husband, whose estate lies near the Pukekaroro hill, a remote site on Te Ika-a-Māui, the North Island of New Zealand. Alice is a highly educated woman who travels in company of her three children and their cumbersome household belongings, including a piano. Alice and her daughter Asia develop a multifaceted mother-daughter relationship, moreover Alice establishes a deep friendship with a neighbour, David Bruce, who becomes her partner after the death of her husband. The similarities between the novel and the film are striking, and sparked a controversial debate in New Zealand, especially after Campion was awarded the Oscar prize for "Best original screenplay". Alistair Fox provides, to my knowledge, the most comprehensive account of the behind-the-scenes legal dispute concerning Campion's plagiarism of Mander's work.⁴³ Curiously, Fox frames his discussion of Jane Mander's *New Zealand River* as the hidden source for plot in Campion's *The Piano* within a study of moral and sexual regulatory mechanisms in the film. In his essay "Puritanism and the Erotics of Transgression" (in Radner 103-122) Fox notes that:

The specifically New Zealand origins of Campion's preoccupation with puritan repression, together with a search for some kind of liberation from it, have not been fully appreciated hitherto because of a general lack of awareness of Campion's debt to an earlier New Zealand source – Jane Mander's 1920 novel *The Story of a New Zealand River*. (106)

The specifics regarding the alleged plagiarism are barely hinted at in the main text, which focuses on the parallels between the two works, but dealt with in the notes. There is ample documentation to show that Campion had been involved with a potential film version of Mander's novel since 1985, when producers and film-right holders Bridget Ikin and John Maynard approached Campion to discuss with her a film project based on *The Story of a New Zealand River*, whose working title was *The River*. Campion

⁴³ Ellen Chesire also discusses the "uncredited adaptation" dispute in her book *In the Scene: Jane Campion* (2017). While her account is less detailed, it generally confirms Fox' findings.

eventually rejected the offer as she was not satisfied with the approved screenplay she would have to work with. Nevertheless, she informed the producers and the Mander estate that she had started writing an independent screenplay, which she termed “[...] my inspiration from Jane Mander’s melodrama”, bearing “precious little of the original” (qtd. in Fox 107). Campion also “paid ‘compensation’ of \$2,000 to the Mander estate in a confidential agreement prior to *The Piano*’s production for ‘lost opportunity’ to publish a film edition of Mander’s novel [...]” (qtd. in Fox 120). Copyright holders, crucially, never attempted to verify in a court of law Campion’s alleged infringement: issues and criticism were raised primarily by Australian mainstream news outlets after the *Oxford Companion to Australian Film* included *The Piano* as an adaptation from Mander’s uncredited novel. Campion’s lawyers issued a statement that clarified the transparent relationship between herself, her work and the Mander’s estate: similarities were acknowledged, but independence and originality were firmly reaffirmed (qtd. in Fox 120-1). Campion’s subsequent novelization of her own screenplay, with the help of Kate Pullinger, in the novel *The Piano* (1994), helped to further consolidate her autonomous authorship.



Fig. 5. Henri Rousseau, *Femme se promenant dans une forêt exotique* (“*Woman Walking into an Exotic Forest*”), oil on canvas, 1905.

The colonial framework, which Campion reworks as an explicit feature in *The Piano* plotline, is less a legacy from the illustrious, inspirational Brontëan sources than a direct link to the operational setting described by Mander, whose complex and belligerent nature is a fundamental part of the ethnic, collective and political tensions at play in Campion's film. The tamed wilderness of Baines' estate, the supposedly remote status of both natives' and settlers' habitations, the uninhabited spaces, such as beaches and forests, are not a mere backdrop, but a consistent assertion of narrative potentiality as well as a recurrent commentary on character-driven plotlines. "*The Piano* is one of those at-the-end-of-the-world stories, where unusual things can happen." states Campion in a 1993 interview with Andreas Fuller (qtd. In Wright Wexman 91). The open spaces that Campion recreates in "submarine colours" – the forest the same uniform bluish hues a large pool of marine water would be – are what she imagines the first European settlers encountered upon arriving in New Zealand, a place that troubled them, and that they tried to "clean up", the make it look more like Europe, as Campion states in a 1993 interview with Thomas Bourguignon and Michel Ciment (in Wright Wexman 106-7). "That's, I think, the essence of Romanticism: this respect for a nature that is considered larger than you, your mind, even humanity" she continues in the same interview (in Wright Wexman 106-7). The respectful approach to nature that Campion hints at in hindsight, during the round of post-release promotional interviews, seems to contradict other ideas that Campion puts forth as interpretational tools for prospective audiences. In her 1993 interview with Marli Feldvoss, New Zealand is described as covered in claustrophobic "bush", thick and dark forests that the settlers burned down "[...] so as not to become claustrophobic", claims Campion. "Impenetrable, like swimming under water. It's a mysterious, beautiful and fairy-like world but it can just as well be unsettling and nightmarish" she continues (interview with Marli Feldvoss qtd. in Wright Wexman 99). Campion achieved the dark watery mood with director of photography Stuart Dryburgh: "Using as their starting point a mutual love of autochromes, an early color process based on potato dyes, they allowed some tints to completely drain scenes and turned the bush into a kind of underwater world".⁴⁴ The

⁴⁴ Mary Cantwell's *New York Times* profile-cum-review "Jane Campion's Lunatic Women" (1993) also traces the history of *The Piano* as venture and production.

effect they were looking for was one of visual apnoea, watery constriction and murky fragmentation: “bottom of the fish tank” was the working definition Campion and Dryburgh used on set, as well as the overall effect they achieved, a total interconnection between the and the bush (Tincknell 26). Moreover, Campion’s mother’s reproduction of Henri Rousseau’s painting *Woman Walking into an Exotic Forest* (1905, see fig. 5) – a dark-hued cartoonish image of a light-dressed European lady standing alone into a forest made of gigantic greenery, tall flowers and heavy fruits hanging from thick branches – is mentioned as an inspiration for the film within a “Civilization versus nature” kind of discourse (interview with Marli Feldvoss qtd. in Wright Wexman 99).

It is perhaps unsurprising that commercial publications sustain an understanding of *Piano*’s natural realm as primarily and majorly “wild” – that is, devoid of civilizing and civilized traits that a white, western audience would immediately recognise as such – while only later, academic texts advanced sustained critiques against the erasure, overlooking and dismissal of native presence (either in Campion’s diegesis or in the ensuing critical discourse on her film). I would also argue, but have no way to prove, that the consistent pairing of *The Piano* with *Wuthering Heights* builds on the acknowledgment of and familiarity with the popular interpretation of Emily Brontë’s novel as primarily concerned with the alleged pathetic fallacy paralleling the strength of human desire and the harshness of the natural surroundings. It should not be forgotten that Campion’s focus is persistently set on the articulation of an epistemology of human (rather than just feminine) desire and its cultural signifiers: the translation of the knowledge of a feeling into film images and dialogue cannot, in her specific case, but work through and by western vocabularies of meaning. The neutrality, or possibly the cultural void that Campion envisions for *Piano* is intrinsically western, as is made evident in her remarks during a 1993 interview with Miro Bilbrough:

The thing that initially fascinated me was how people, without any education of the nature of romance and attraction, react to the raw situation. What really is the nature of romance and attraction? How does it grow? How does it develop? How does it become eroticised? How does it become sexual? how does it transcend us and become something more spiritual? (qtd. in Wright Wexman 118)

Readings that build on these premises inevitably prioritise the most obvious elements of heterosexuality, femininity and relations across gender binarism: in her interview with Marli Feldvoss Champion describes how Ada is supposed to openly resent the suppression women would face in the 1850s, and comments on the “rebellious” streak in both Ada and Baines: “Men simply have more possibilities to express themselves than do not necessarily entail problematic situations for them” (qtd. in Wright Wexman 97). Her statements are certain to found the base for legitimate (albeit biased) appraisals of *Piano* as, foremost, a tale of domestic violence and individual escape. The suppression of intersectional subnarratives is easy, yet not inevitable: Champion points to diverging plotlines in her own commentary of Baines, who is from a lower social class than the other settlers, is not at ease with them, does not expressly share their values, and at the same time is, obviously, alien to the Māori community he befriends (interview with Marli Feldvoss qtd. in Wright Wexman 97). After all, Champion herself admits “I am not English. I belong to a colonial culture and I had to invent my own fiction” (interview with Bourguignon and Ciment qtd. in Fox 113). The natural setting does not come devoid of deep political unease, whose influence on plot is, I would argue, more powerful and more interesting than conventional criticism focussing on character development would care to admit.

In his essay “His Natural Whiteness: Modes of Ethnic Presence and Absence in Some Recent Australian Films” (Craven 2001), David Callahan understands *The Piano* as related to the current of Australian films promoting “enclave politics”, that is, “a discourse of belonging that excluded Aboriginal peoples, even as it appropriates references to them” (108). Such films, Callahan argues, tend to position the individual against a wider public social group, which, despite being smaller than the entire population, is always culturally defined as the whole, a whole, however, which systematically excluded the non-white ethnicities and their role in the formation of Australian consciousness and materiality (108). *The Piano*’s semi-exclusive focus on a white European enclave is, however, aware of the Māori community’s life, and the two groups’ interactions have a part in the development of the narrative. “[in Jane Champion’s *The Piano*] the claustrophobic enclave and its inhabitants’ more troubled and urgent encounter with their sensuality is unsettled constantly by the presence of the

Māori people and their alternative approaches to the film's central issues of property, negotiation and power" (Callahan 109). In his essay "Puritanism and the Erotics of Transgression. The New Zealand Influence in Jane Campion's Thematic Imaginary" (in Radner 2009), Alistair Fox traces a thematic link (which is especially visible in *The Piano*, but might also resurface in *An Angel at My Table*) that places considerable spatial significance to the underlying conflict between nativist culture and imported puritanical belief. Puritanism is not to be intended as merely a religious doctrine, Fox points out, but rather as a secular current, whose outputs become visible in the form of "tyrannical work ethic" and "repressive codes of behaviour" that attempt to minimise pleasure-seeking (104). Since Campion's interest in the underbelly of human private experience has often been analysed in psychoanalytical and/or biographical terms – to varying degrees of persuasiveness – Fox suggests that "Campion's lifelong preoccupation as a filmmaker with sexuality and eroticism may be viewed as a response to, and a reaction against, the puritanical repression that dominated New Zealand society during her childhood" (105). Most interesting, however, is the fact that Fox also senses the relevance of Campion's idiosyncratic use of photography – the "bottom of the fishtank" blue autochrome or the recursive golden light halo – but interprets it as suggestive of repressive states of mind for the characters and, in certain circumstances, as a visual indicator of the release from the oppression (109). I remain unconvinced by Fox' case for the symbolic use of light as a carrier of meaning⁴⁵ – which I believe is an indicator of subjective critical interpretation rather than a specific feature

⁴⁵ Moreover, Fox disagrees with Dana Polan, who states "Campion's career bears no unity of theme and style but is marked rather by shifts of direction and changes of emphasis" (Polan, *Jane Campion*, 60), counter-arguing that "her oeuvre does have a thematic unity and coherence that allies her with other New Zealand filmmakers who have similarly tackled and explored the symptoms of puritanical repression in antipodean culture and social life (Fox, in Radner 118). I tend to agree more with Polan, I don't find the "puritanical streak" strong or important enough in each of her films to single it out as the fundamental push in her work. Overall, I tend to find the attachment that Campion manifests for the dark, the opaque and the unspeakable more interesting, especially when such features are rooted in her character exploration, but not limited to individual narrative arcs or psychological theorisation regarding her protagonists.

of film language – but, most importantly, I am doubtful of his statement that characters so constantly intent on “excap[ing] from the confines of puritanical restraint” (109). I suggest that Campion’s character’s strife is a fundamentally secular one, a search for the balance between the need for self-determination and the cultural, conceptual confines of their environment. How can Ada wish for sexual liberation in terms that are familiar and recognizable by contemporary audiences if the character is intrinsically devoid of the knowledge of any form of freedom, nor has access to any examples of liberated sexuality? The ending, therefore, would not show a breakage of boundaries, merely, a stretch, an adjustment in a softer form.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to resize the happiness of *Piano*’s ending, to scale down the degree of success that Ada’s struggle to regain control of her life suggests in order to assess the film’s structural inclination towards the white, colonial – *Pākehā* – plotline, to the detriment of the native Māori backdrop and group of extras. In interviews, Campion appears particularly reticent with regards to issues of postcoloniality and representation of the Māori people in *The Piano*, and the film itself does little to problematize the European settlers’ presence and control of the land.⁴⁶ *The Piano*,

⁴⁶ I am aware of the ambivalent transnationality that characterises Campion, a New Zealand national whose education and work experience in cinema have mainly taken place in Australia, as well as in the US and other non-Pacific countries. Moreover, it is not lost on me that Campion’s films are aimed at international audiences, and therefore need to simplify their geopolitical specificities in order to be as widely intelligible (and pleasurable) as possible.

Belinda Smaill’s collection of colonial themes in Australia cinema, “Asianness and Aboriginality in Australian Cinema” (2013), describes a tendency to feature Aboriginal and Asian characters and/or plotlines more frequently in films that “reference the landscape tradition” rather than in “stories of urbanized multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism” (89) which resonates with my own discussion about natural surroundings as narrative assertion in *The Piano*. Smaill detects an expression of demographic as well as racial anxiety in Australian film industry’s treatment of the Aboriginal and Asian that, she argues, is a form of othering and racializing, a way to shape Australian history in order to accommodate white British settlement, to “[perform] and [maintain] the limits of community is not specific to Australia” (90).

Kerstin Knopf’s paper “Kangaroos, Petrol, Joints and Sacred Rocks: Australian Cinema Decolonized” (2013) provides a general overview of contemporary Australian film productions that fruitfully alienate “neo/colonial media practices, including appropriation, tokenism and the silencing of Indigenous voices” (190) by means of independent or collaborative production enterprises that develop counter the

however, presents conflicts that are indicators of the intersecting partnership between colonial policies and patriarchal value systems, its narrative being particularly suited to illustrate the inner workings behind the acquisition of wealth, the legal and moral justification for such accumulation, the rules and policies dictating *who* is to benefit from it. “What exactly was the nineteenth century sociohistorical setting that *The Piano* attempts to replicate?” (109) asks Mark A. Reid in his essay “A Few Black Keys and Māori Tattoos: Re-reading Jane Campion’s *The Piano* in Post-Négritude Time” (2000), in which he notes that the indigenous population of the Aotearoa islands was ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and that the arrival of the British settlers entailed their exclusion from the best grazing lands towards remote and barren ones. Non-British and non-European migration influxes, however, were always lower and slower if compared to migration to other colonial spots, such as Australia or the Americas, and the result was an “essentially binary character of settler colonialism” (Nicholas Thomas qtd. in Reid 109). Campion’s vision of a colonial settlement substitutes political aggression with visual predominance: Reid talks about “visual surplus” which “naturalizes whiteness and their settler status while it simultaneously obscures, and makes foreign, the Māori people in what was once Māori land” (107). It is a strategy that is particularly evident in Baines’ *Tā moko* face tattoos, which encapsulates the perceived acceptability of cultural appropriation on top of the land grabbing that is left implied as background. Reid compares Baines’ *Tā moko* to a watered-down form of blackface (110), a performative act that might well pass a declaration of solidarity and admiration, a visual signifier standing for “cultural hybridity” (108), one which eventually reveals itself as a cover up,

neocolonial discourse of racial and national “otherness” with narratives that employ native storytelling modes and engage with contemporary native representations in both urban and rural settings.

Furthermore, Anne Barnes’ discussion of the “Gothic” streak influencing both Australian literature and cinema – in “Mapping the Landscape with Sound: Tracking the Soundscape from Australian Colonial Gothic Literature to Australian Cinema and Australian Transcultural Cinema” (2017) – is especially resonant with the overarching mode in *The Piano*. Barnes juxtaposes her account of the history of Australian film production (which, from the 1980s onwards started implementing its marketplace with substantial government-funded schemes to the benefit of Aboriginal filmmaking professionals) with an appraisal of the endurance and reclaiming of the British settlers’ “Gothic” writing of an unknown, “unreadable” new land and landscape (160).

an attempt to blend in only to better control white settlers' interests from the inside of the Māori difference. The meaning of *Tā moko* tattoos in Māori culture is paramount: it is a form of visual and portable identification that grants the immediate placement of the wearer's position within their *whakapapa*, their genealogy. *Whakapapa* not only inscribes the individual vertically within their genealogical ancestral and blood family, and, horizontally, within their extended tribal kinship, but also connects them to the *whakapapa* of the land. "It is a powerful statement of being Maori" Leonie Pihama notes (in Margolis 127), and Baines' half-*moko* cannot but read as an appropriative travesty given his rootlessness in Aotearoa. In fact, despite his "good savage" cosmetic fusion Baines remains and acts as a middleman throughout, "a white man who belongs to the managerial class of a colonial system" (Reid 111) whose breach of male peer loyalty does not affect him nearly as severely as Ada. Reid argues that the international audiences that welcomed positively *The Piano* were "blinded" by Campion's crafting of "voyeuristic pleasure" by means of Ada's "hoop skirts and laced corsets of too-much-importance" (114), thus implying that Baines' *moko* face tattoos did not arouse as much interest, the blackface-y performance they signify as naturalised as the "darky" trope that the Māori extras were allegedly cast in. Reid quotes black feminist critic bell hooks' takedown of *The Piano* as a the umpteenth revision of tried-and-tested, sanitised narratives of superficially peaceful interracial coexistence: "[t]he nineteenth-century world of the white invasion of New Zealand is utterly romanticized in this film, (complete with docile happy darkies – Māori natives – who appear to have not a care in the world)" (qtd. in Reid 114-5). What makes *The Piano* potentially biased against the Māori people it represents is its latent assimilability with the discourse around *Pākehā* identity-building that Leonie Pihama describes in her essay "Ebony and Ivory" (collected in Margolis 2000): "The invention of the new nation of "New Zealanders" depended both upon the imposition of a foreign culture and the repression of the memory of the violence that was imposed upon Māori people (123). The interdependence between Māori and British settlers is paramount to the formation of New Zealand ideological national discourse and the establishing of cultural norms, the presence of Māori people is a supporting role is, therefore, an indicator of such relationship, one that is at once of subordination and of collaboration. Pihama argues for

an understanding of *The Piano* as a film that fully complies with the conventions of the “colonial gaze”, since it “neither criticizes nor challenges the stereotypes that have been paraded continuously as ‘the way we were’” (130) it reinforces the representative notion that casts Māori (and possibly “native” non-White people in general) as lazy, uncultured, happy-go-lucky and sexually voracious, whose women fully adhere to Western constructions of gender, and therefore spend their time cleaning, cooking and being serviceable to men, either native or colonists. “Racial dualism” (Pihama 130), therefore, underpins the filmic narrative of *The Piano* more profoundly than “artistic license get resolved” (Pihama 131), as the aspects of Māori society that are inscribed in a film narrative destined to international screens still comply with a colonial-oriented perspective. Pihama also quotes from interviews with the principal cast, Sam Neill and Holly Hunter in order to provide an idea of the interdependence at work backstage:

In an interview with Helen Barlow, Neill comments: “There were a lot of rewarding things that happened to me on the film, not the least of them being the sort of generosity of the spirit that the Māori cast brought to the film. I’m forever in their debt. They were fantastic. Hunter provided similar insights into her interactions with the Māori cast and crew, noting that they provided a “spiritual backbone to the movie. We all felt very protected by them”. (131)

Pihama’s criticism is informed by the boundary in the duality of racial presence: the fact that the active cooperation backstage between Māori extras and White cast and crew did not translate on screen, where the narrative reiterates stale colonial stereotypes, is a serious and potentially harming failing on Campion’s part.

Regardless of Campion’s positioning in the debate about neo-colonial and postcolonial discourse, the relevance of conventional “native” signifiers within *The Piano*, and the oppositional dynamics they create with the “settlers” narrative primacy demonstrate that her rooting in historical past encompasses her dependency on literary texts alone. Campion’s process, therefore, should also be traced in other features that signify her imaginative recreation of “pastness”: there are aesthetic signposts (the parallel use of “small” and “feminine”) and specific themes (the bleakness of the landscape) that she borrows or gestures towards, in addition to plotlines and the exposure of mental states.

Campion's *The Piano* offers insight that encompasses the focus on its female protagonist's individual mindset, rather it uses locality and chronological specificity to produce a sort of "temporal jump", allowing audiences' contemporary culture to reflect back on itself, imagine its progress and evaluate its current statuses. Campion also fosters interest in her characters' surroundings, her use of landscape – as backdrop and as social environment – suggests the potentiality of an acknowledgement of omitted political histories, such as the British colonization of Aotearoa, the violent displacement of its native Māori population and the naturalisation of the artificial *Pākehā* national ideal. A critical evaluation that detects narrative propulsion in minimal authorial choices such as costume and mise-en-scène will eventually situate characters, including protagonists, as pawns in a larger (filmic) debate about culture formation, as if Campion were asking (and perhaps venturing an answer) what counts as culture, what people are willing and capable to do in order to update it or partake in it, and what effects it exerts on them. Campion's visual recapitulation of cultural trajectories through the adaptation framework will become more evident with *The Portrait of a Lady*, where her treatment of the novelistic source allows space to draw a parallel history of the cinematic medium itself.

2.3. *Portrait of a Lady*, a Kinetic History of Cinema

Isabel Archer's brother-in-law, Mr. Ludlow, makes a fugacious appearance in the fourth chapter of Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) to offer a convincing case against the interpretation of his sister-in-law:

"Well, I don't like originals; I like translations," Mr. Ludlow had more than once replied. "Isabel's written in a foreign tongue. I can't make her out. She ought to marry an Armenian or a Portuguese." (James 31)

James' novel appears preoccupied with notions of originality, whether in behaviour or belief, but especially with its translation to real-life actions. Adaptations of the novel's philosophical plotline need take such underpinnings into account to work out analogous, or at least reminiscent, narrative architectures, if they wish to proceed in accordance

with a principle of fidelity, or even baseline resemblance. Isabel Archer is a young and ambitious American expatriate in Europe who, upon receiving a large inheritance from her England-based uncle Mr. Touchett, intends to set off on a life of independence and self-fulfillment. Isabel, however, falls prey to a scheme devised by Madame Merle, an acquaintance of the Touchetts who introduces her to art collector and fortune hunter Gilbert Osmond, who will later be revealed as Madame Merle's secret ex-lover and exclusive custodian of their daughter, Pansy. Isabel marries him and settles in his Florentine residence, but her marriage is unhappy, and soon becomes abusive. When Isabel disobeys Osmond's prohibition to visit her dying cousin Ralph Touchett in England, she comes to face two choices: to stay away from Italy, and therefore leave Osmond, or to return to a violent marriage, out of loyalty to Pansy. James's Isabel acts out of personal accountability and goes back to Osmond, whereas Campion's Isabel, controversially, lingers at the threshold: by the time the film comes to its conclusion, she is not shown debating, nor acting on any decision concerning her future. James' ending provides closure and showcases the moral rationale that Isabel incarnates, possibly to her disadvantage. Campion, on the contrary, freezes Isabel in the complex process that triangulates conflict, abuse and will. She frames Nicole Kidman's Isabel, therefore, as a conflicted subject, besides virtually implicating viewers in the choice Isabel is called upon to make. The philosophical imagination that James resorts to to resolve Isabel's dilemma is reinstated in Campion's adaptation as a departing point for a first-person, independent assessment of the situation: viewers are neither shown nor told how Isabel should or would react, rather, they are encouraged to come up with a personal vision of Isabel's future.

Flights of fancy and baits to Isabel's imagination litter James' *Portrait*: James has Ralph Touchett state that "I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination. Isabel has a great deal of imagination" (192). The opportunity to highlight (and visualise) such variables of consciousness is one that is not lost on adapters, especially if they work in different media. To materialise one's imagination, to freeze one's images of a story into a shareable work is, however, risky business. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn point at Jane Campion's 1996 film adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady* (and its tepid critical reception) to stress

how much is at stake with novel to film adaptations (86): the director's ideological reputation mixes with audiences' expectations based on genre conventions and, most importantly, single viewer's idiosyncratic idea of what the (their) story should "look like". Hutcheon and O'Flynn frame their Campion reference with a series of questions regarding the supposedly "pejorative" act that adaptations seem to provide:

[...] why would anyone willingly enter this moralistic fray and become an adapter? What motivates adapters, knowing that their efforts will be compared to competing imagined versions in people's heads and inevitably be found wanting? Why would they risk censure for monetary opportunism? [...] Like jazz variations, adaptations point to individual creative decisions and actions, yet little of the respect accorded to the jazz improviser is given to most adapters. (86)

The process of appropriation and adaptation of the source novel that Campion and her screenwriting collaborator Laura Jones adopted has been discussed primarily with regards to the severed ending of the film and to the black and white opening sequence, since both stand apart as prominent creative choices that exceed the (allegedly) straightforward relationship of adaptation. The independent forces and original ideas showcased in Campion's work, however, outnumber the aforementioned examples, some are, possibly, better disguised, while others are virtually undetectable within the filmic text alone. Peter Long and Kate Ellis' behind-the-scenes documentary *Portrait: Jane Campion and The Portrait of a Lady* (1997) shows the collaborative dynamics at play on set. For instance, Long and Ellis capture one-on-one conversations between Campion and her actors, Nicole Kidman and Barbara Hershey, as they prepare to shoot the final confrontation between Isabel and Madame Merle. In the scene, Madame Merle is due to wait under the rain for Isabel's carriage to depart, their dialogue is crafted so as to reveal Isabel (and remind audiences) that she has her cousin Ralph to thank for the inheritance she received from her uncle. Kidman notes that Madame Merle's line in the screenplay is "he made you rich", whereas, book at hand, she shows Campion that James' original is "he made you a rich woman". Kidman feels that the addition of "woman" adds complexity to the idea of wealth, and Campion agrees to discuss it with Hershey as well. Hershey is in tune with the intrinsic difference between "rich" and "rich

woman”, but notes that just stating “rich” as the closing word of the sentence would make it more impressive, possibly cutting.

In her study *The Vulgar Question of Money* (2013) Elsie B. Michie “follows the money” in marriage plots devised by eighteenth and nineteenth century novelists: financial matters are treated as a cultural trope that discloses writers’ shifting approach to economic changes of their time. With regards to James, Michie argues that *Portrait* is the primeval case in which “James uses the opposition between the rich and the poor woman to contrast the appeal of money as an abstraction to the sensuality of material objects” (183). Since Michie understands the core plot of the novel as “the story of a man positioned between a former lover with no money and an American heiress who possesses incalculable wealth” (184), his comparison and contrast between Isabel Archer and Madame Merle renders them epitomes, respectively, of abstract wealth and material possessions. Madame Merle’s quote “I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I have a great respect for *things!*” illustrates James’ notion of *embeddedness* – an individual’s experience of themselves as defined by the objects surrounding them, in Madame Merle’s case, her fashionable clothes – and, Michie argues, sets her apart from Isabel, whose measure of the self does not take the material into account (184-5). Michie situates James’ representation of the “rich woman” type at the tail end of the conceptual evolution that gradually stopped imagining, as in the classic novel of manners, moneyed existence as intrinsically vulgar: for Jamesian heiresses like Isabel, on the contrary, wealth is a mark of aesthetic values (23). A literary progression that resonates with the political shift, at the turn of the twentieth century, that oversaw the end of British economic world dominance as it was being replaced by the American sphere of influence (Michie 23). The dynamic between Madame Merle’s financial preoccupations and Isabel’s new-generation approach to money is phrased subtly in the film adaptation, but the insight that the Long and Ellis’ behind-the-scene documentary provides testifies for the creative tension being present and active, in the creators’ minds and conversation, during the production process. With regards to the “rich” / “rich woman” scene debate, Campion’s resolution is a diplomatic one: they will shoot both versions, and postpone the final choice to postproduction. The definitive cut has Hershey as Madame Merle pronounce “rich” followed by a pause: the

effect is indeed striking, and suggests feelings of both awe and contempt towards Isabel's financial evolution.

The appropriation/adaptation twist that Campion operates with her *Portrait* is profoundly sensitive to the notion of ease and possibility as a result of ample economic availability, both diegetically and behind the scenes. Campion made *Portrait* on a 24 million-dollar budget, shooting over the course of six months on set and locations in Italy and UK: references to the large-scale production of *Portrait* are, in fact, often and variously acknowledged in reviews and academic appraisals of the film as part and parcel of Campion's conceptual project. Rebecca Gordon opens her essay "Portraits Perversely Framed: Jane Campion and Henry James" (2002) on a note of dismissal towards Campion's generous funding – only to later counter-argue in favour of Campion's artistic licences. Insinuations that Campion may have attempted a career-jump for mainstream cinema circuits, or that she may have tried to cash-in on the heritage film adaptation vogue of the 1990s, can be summarised with Gordon's suggestion that Campion's features "[...] look to the cynical eye like calculated shots at bankability" (14). "The film oozes money and high production values as much as James's characters ooze money and psychological perversities" convincingly notes Gordon (14). The high visual impact that the film is designed and financed to create, however, also relies on similarly market-conscious textual and extratextual foundations. Peter Brooks' 1976 study *The Melodramatic Imagination* dissects the popular motif behind the theatrical-like enactment of emotions in Jamesian prose: besides his interest in stage (semiotic) conventions, James nurtured a consistent interest for contemporary theatre "because it promised a sociable, institutional glory, and because it offered the possibility of popular and financial success" (Brooks 160). His involvement in British theatre productions, Books argue, is the evidence that James wished to work within popular genres and receive recognition for it, in order to revive "a glorious public tradition extending back to Romanticism" (160). James' visible "imaginative mode" (preface vii) arguably equates and responds to the melodramatic genre, which Brooks understands as the foremost popular, "post-sacred" narrative representation – or rather "hyperdramatization" – of great forces in conflict, whose clash elicits the drama of choice and, by consequence, the unveiling of the core values within a secular milieu, or else, the beliefs that are

paramount to a single character's life (preface viii). For instance, the melodramatic framework throws into relief Isabel Archer's "career", which develops as a consistent succession of choices whose stakes are increasingly "polarized and intensified" up to the acme of the novel, Isabel's decision to return to her husband in Italy (Brooks 157).

The "melodrama of consciousness" (Brooks 157) envisioned by James, therefore, becomes the dramatization of a purely inner struggle, one person's private reckoning and, crucially, recognition of herself within a specific social and ontological realm. Stylized notion of good versus evil, heightened states of consciousness and emotion, the clash between dream and desire against chance, and how they all merge into the experience of the real and of the self, thus enlightening the everyday life sprung from the reification of compromise, disappointment and personal outcomes: the features that the melodramatic mode emphasises, also encompass James' use of romance as "the realm of knowledge reached through desire" (Brooks 154). The moral excitement and sentimental excess that James weaves in a novel that, on the surface, boasts realism as its working rationale, are in keeping with the need – which Brooks reads as common on nineteenth century novels – to "get its meaning across, to invest in its renderings of life a sense of memorability and significance" (13) by means of theatricality and its expressive vocabulary. It is in these gestures that the most striking link between page and screen can be found: theatre melodrama that codified the system of legible visual, verbal and nonverbal cues of the pantomime, makes up the basic gestural repository in early silent cinema (Brooks ix). Genre and, crucially, popularity (the meeting of enjoyability and generalised intelligibility) are, therefore, at the intersection of the three performing and narrative arts – theatre, novel and cinema – and, as I will argue in this section, could also provide a fruitful framework to understand the adaptive relationship between *Portrait* as a novel by James and *Portrait* as a film by Campion. Campion's understanding of *Portrait* stretches the narrative lifeline as primary link between the 1881 work and the 1996 one: rather than perform a faithful rendition, Campion prioritises the sense of genre legacy in terms of semiotic legibility of the form's conventions and, most importantly, enlarges her homage to include other, medium-specific legacies, such as the technological history of cinema. The bias leading to readings Campion's *Portrait* primarily or exclusively through the lens of gender –

which generally leads to focus on her shaping of Isabel as, first and foremost, a female character – is an approach that does not exclude, and would benefit, from an assessment of the film as an adaptation of narrative modes and, specifically, its extensive referencing of popular genres. Campion's *portrait* is not limited to the depiction of a lone sitter, it also, arguably, frames the history of ideas about how to look, what to show and discern what to tell so as to ensure communication and engagement. The tendency to read Isabel as a substitute for Campion – and to superimpose their quest for meaning – appears as common and acceptable as the propensity to mingle with their money. What appears to be their distinctive trait, after all, is that they both are lone women entrusted with great sums: the reaction they appear to elicit, therefore, is one of disbelief, possibly distrust, followed, invariably, by a wish to keep an eye on them. On the one hand, In James' novel, Ralph "[...] should like to put a little wind in [Isabel's] sails" (James 191), because he " [...] should like to see her going before the breeze!" (James 193), a feeling that Mr. Touchett promptly interprets as a desire for amusement and, incidentally, one of a merely visual, detached nature. There is a performative expectation that comes attached with the material benefits Isabel is bound to receive: the tacit understanding that the private choices that money affords are always up for scrutiny by onlookers. Beyond the fictional realm, the (perhaps biased) objectives hiding beneath the close observation of Campion herself – much like James' Isabel Archer – seem to generate a brand of biography-based criticism whose agenda fixates on establishing similarities and striking comparisons between Campion's private life and the stories she tells on screen. Alistair Fox' 2011 book *Jane Campion. Authorship and Personal Cinema* is an exercise in this kind of biographical approach. While Fox' comprehensive assessment of *Portrait* and its specificities within the historical development of Campion's career is, indeed, insightful, his critical strategy founded on detailed biographical references often forces readings of her films that are, at best, impressionistic, but often come out as bizarre or intrusive. Fox posits *Portrait* as Campion's primary counter reaction to *The Piano*, as her adaptation further develops notions pertaining to the satisfaction of one's desire, and its sustainability, which she inaugurated in 1993, while attempting to complicate her very own "feminist fairytale" (Fox 135). *Portrait*, Fox contends, shows sentimental life as *is*, as subject to stronger

pushes and values in the individual's holistic existence rather than the other way around. However, Campion's primary model for Isabel is, Fox argues, self-identification on multiple levels: between Isabel and Campion, between Isabel and Campion's mother, between Osmond's relationship with his daughter Pansy and Campion's own relationship with her father (138). Fox goes as far as to reference Campion's deceased son as mirrored in Isabel's implied grief for the loss of her baby (141). Campion's statements from interviews and press kits are often interpreted literally. For instance, Fox quotes screenwriter Laura Jones' account of the brainstorming and drafting process behind the script, and understands Jones' avowal that their impression of Isabel comprised the personal assessment of their own experiences as young women as proof of the biographical foundation of *Portrait* (145).

If one "reads" the film bearing in mind these autobiographical investments, it becomes apparent that, even though Campion and Laura Jones, her screenwriter, have remained fairly faithful to James's original, they have made significant changes in order to align the story with Campion's personal investments in it. (Fox 145)

Fox' focus, however, is not on Campion's consciousness, her construction of subjectivity or even her creative understanding of life, rather, he appears to privilege a deterministic outlook on Campion's life history, as if she had been *made* solely by what happened to her as an individual, and had therefore chosen film as a medium to express ideas and feelings that are not self-contained or theoretical, but derivative (and descriptive) of those personal experiences. This approach, I fear, risks effacing Campion's creative and authorial agency, and could belittle her capacity to distinguish private occurrences from other narratives, whether external or extraneous episodes.

A merely biographical approach to analysis might strike as biased – it is unlikely that a director who does not identify as female and does not explore female private and subconscious lives would raise comparable curiosity – whereas a comprehensive look at Campion's work as responsive to, simultaneously, her source's historical context along with the cine-industry momentum and trends at the time of production, usually prove more convincing and nuanced. Gordon's remark that "Campion's signature

camerawork and clinical exploration of sexuality titillate audiences who can glimpse the leisured class of the late nineteenth century and be rapt by its repression” (14) encapsulates the variety of rationales and interests at stake with Campion’s film adaptation. Campion’s inquiry into the sentimental troubles of a young woman deserve acknowledgement beyond similarities with her own troubles as a young woman: her act of portraiture is profoundly aware of the mirror effect it can elicit in viewers, and even more so of the distortions built in the reflective surface of viewer-character identification. Within that very chronological distortion – the imaginary peeping into the inner life of women in the past – Campion finds the space to challenge more than the sexual repression and claustrophobic gender roles thrust upon her protagonist. There is a distinct theatricality in Campion’s para-narrative spectacle of gestures, in the visual pantomime that fills in the space of action while dialogues, rather than images, supply useful information and backstories about characters’ relations to one another.

Whether something goes lost whenever James’ omniscient commentary and pithy insight need be substituted by visual components, Campion appears to consistently fill in the gaps with idiosyncratic, comedic bits of information that entertain viewers, endear the protagonists and geographically situate the scene. It appears that Campion’s narrative arc does not merely work on the shallow, superficial level of fidelity and transcodification. There is added playfulness when Isabel and Ralph engage in a relaxed game of hide-and-seek with one of his cigarettes. There is a tinge of irony towards Isabel’s scholarly ambitions when she collects her word cards from the closet, which she had pasted up to remember refined words such as “Nihilism / nihilistic,” “Probity / honesty / integrity,” “Abnegation + Aberration / aberrant,” “Admonish” (see fig. 6). There is depth in the trivialities of daily life in public, whose management throws into relief interpersonal dynamics between characters: Isabel’s complicity with her journalist friend Henrietta Stackpole shows up when they both get too close to the statues on display as they wander through museum halls, and are admonished by a whistling guard. The critical analysis that, almost twenty five years after its release, *Portrait* elicits and deserves, should involve a push beyond subjectivity, specifically that of a *femme*-identifying individual who also boasts numerous forms of linguistic, cultural and wealth privileges.



Fig. 6. Isabel's "vocabulary cards" in her wardrobe closet in *Portrait of a Lady*.

Such appraisals should aim to map the ethics that, being larger, include and encompass the woman protagonist that is customarily dealt with as the sole interpreter, enabler and, possibly, thinker of the narrative morals at stake. Whether it is possible to think about desire and bodies in ways that sideline the psychoanalytic, that also see mental and bodily energies as cultural, political actions – to a certain extent clearer, public and shareable, rather than relating to obscure privacy and personal history – is a question that contemporary forms of feminist film criticism are addressing. An appraisal of Campion's feminine focus as broader than its gendered features needs to take into account directorial choices beyond narrative development and character-centric criticism. Campion uses adaptation as a tool to reflect on the history of cinema from visual entertainment to art to commercial venture, on the history of women as subjects within society and, crucially, how both histories entwine and influence one another. While Campion's focus on gender in *Portrait* is topical (as a narrative point) and

foundational (as a stylistic strategy), her parallel exploration of genre (as manipulation and exploitation of media conventions) is equally important.

Nancy Bentley's essay "Conscious Observation: Jane Campion's *Portrait of a Lady*" collected in *Henry James Goes to the Movies* (edited by Susan M. Griffin, 2002) posits – in keeping with feminist-oriented and character-focused appraisals of the adaptation – Isabel's sexual crisis as the focal point of Campion's *Portrait*. Moreover, the material visualisation of Isabel's body that the filmic medium allows, notes Bentley, the literal fulfillment of Ralph Touchett's wish to pursue the "conscious observation of a lovely woman" (127) as embodied by Isabel. The notion of gaze is crucial in Bentley's comparison of novel and film, but she does not employ the terminology to describe a power-move willfully oriented from a desiring subject towards a desired one, rather, as the conscious attention towards the very structure of the medium at play. The spectacle, the framing, the posing of subjects – either in motion or as standing characters – translates seamlessly from James' metanovelistic conceits about realism in fiction to Campion's exploration of visual capabilities of screen narratives. Campion's work, however, innovates the debate of mimetic representation through its "period piece" and "costume drama" features. The chronological deviation, arising from the diegetic 1870s setting and viewers' post 1996 fruition of the narrative, reveals the contradiction at heart of period films: characters' travails suscite understanding and, possibly, identification on a peer level, whereas the "pastness" of the setting calls for visual enjoyment precisely because of its fictive nature. The very anachronism caused by the jarring juxtaposition of past setting and modern technology is, in Bentley's argument, a source for complex, yet pleasurable experiences.

Immersed as we are in the unstable ironies and jumpy technological rhythms of our time, movies about gracious living and the lives of beautiful women offer the increasingly rare experiences of slow, languorous contemplation, the sound of sustained conversation, and charming intimations of the sort of uncorseted sex possible only in an age of corsets. (Bentley 131)

The reality that a period film like *Portrait* is compelling insofar as it projects the pleasurable portrait of a bourgeois past *before* cinema, and provides visual cues that

help create an imaginary (and, to some extent, fanciful) idea of life in the past. The artifice is all the more successful – i.e. enthralling – when its material production is carefully dissimulated, the aforementioned deviation concealed. Bentley, however, convincingly argues that Campion’s direction rejects period film conventions, such as the tendency to accommodate viewers’ fantasies of the past as escapism, by forcefully reinstating her own film’s boundaries and medium-related specificities: the monochrome choral opening scene is just an example of Campion’s playful twist on her craft’s structure (132). Hilary Radner similarly remarks, in her essay “‘In extremis’: Jane Campion and the Woman’s Film” (collected in *Jane Campion: Cinema, Nation, Identity*, 2009), that disruptive interventions into the film’s structure, rather than in its narrative, single out Campion’s mark as an “*auteur*”: hence *Portrait’s* surreal animated sequences, stripped-down chronology, and the controversial contemporary documentary-style opening sequence.

The nature of these ruptures is not stylistically consistent; it is the act of rupture, the drawing attention to the film as such and to its “createdness” and hence its creator, the *auteur*, that is sustained, if not always in the same manner. (Radner 7)

Portrait’s opening credits and title supply a monochromatic (with just a brief colour shot halfway) a-narrative sequence showcasing individual portraits of moving young women and girls, contemporary women, in contemporary attire and sporting diverse appearances and ethnicities. A feminine voice-over mimics a private conversation among girlfriends, in which the pleasures and logistics of kissing are discussed (the moment right before the actual kissing, when desire becomes certainty, is deemed the most exquisite part of the whole experience). The girls are filmed in a leafy wood, forming circles, dancing and sitting on branches: their collective presence sets a joyful mood, one that is immediately tipped over when Campion cuts to an extreme up close shot of Isabel’s (Nicole Kidman) worried eyes, in full colour. Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s notion of *homosociality* within

James' prose,⁴⁷ which, in the *Portrait* novel, is particularly evident in the first chapter opening scene, can be fruitfully adapted to Campion's own filmic palimpsest. While James's narrative opening hovers above the tea-time conversation between Ralph Touchett and Lord Warburton about Ralph's female relatives – his mother Mrs. Touchett and his cousin Isabel – Campion reclaims the dialogic form of exchange, as well as its homosocial structure. Campion's opening scene showcases female homosociality, thus twisting James', but does not change the topic: women and girls are still the subject under scrutiny, except this time the act of telling is one of self-disclosure and self-explanation, rather than one of biased speculation, like the one performed by James' characters. The idea of a warm utopia of feminine collectiveness opens, yet is unable to fully frame a film narrative of one, a lone sitter that is too large and solitary to make space for salvation via the helpful presence of peers. However, what percolates from framing to narrative is the sense that the satisfaction of one's romantic wish is parallel to, if not indistinguishable from personal fulfillment and contentedness, and that the analogy is particularly pertinent to young women.

Portrait, as a novel and as a film, is indeed easily readable as a romance turned grotesquely bad: the shattered promise of romantic love, the aching split between married cohabitation and affectionate companionship are concerns that genres of popular entertainment share and regularly revisit. Roberta Garrett's study of contemporary women-oriented film subgenres *Postmodern Chick Flicks: the Return of the Woman's Film* (2007) mentions Campion's *Portrait* as a specimen of 1990s period films that successfully subverted market and narrative conventions behind plotlines targeting supposedly feminine audiences. Sentimentality, in Campion's *Portrait*, is addressed as a positive force, not as schmaltzy excess: its feminine connotations are employed to reclaim the domesticity and uneventful triviality of women's historical lives as rightful subjects for film narratives. Garrett notes that "the cinematic revival of conventional 'feminine' forms has been given much less critical attention than the simultaneous trend towards generic reworkings that situate women in conventional male

⁴⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expanded and popularised the term in her 1985 study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Kosofsky Sedgwick observes instances of same-sex communal and intrapersonal bonds of platonic kinship in various works of fiction, including Henry James' novels.

roles” (52). The gender shift in the mainstream brand of reboot cinema, in fact, risks crystallising genre and gender expectations, as its main outcomes are didactic: “cross-identification” is encouraged, and female representation is expanded beyond the standard feminist-adjacent film genres, such as avantgarde, experimental and low-budget productions. Garrett, on the contrary, is supportive of the subversive potential in “clever, self-conscious ‘chick flick’, a text aimed at female audiences, often working through a recognisable feminine genre but also playing with and often critiquing the form” (52), such as Campion’s *Portrait*. Campion’s ambiguity – which I understand and process as a positive feature of her work – may arise from her commitment to pushing the limits of the “woman’s film” without ever really breaking free from its conventions, thus placing her in an in-between position, halfway commercial and almost “counter” cinema, her work being feminine-centred without an explicit feminist agenda. The irony that Garrett perceives in stances such as Campion’s is an intellectual approach that visibly gestures towards obsolete notions of womanhood, respectability and social accountability to historicise contemporary understandings of the same topics. The effect is double, and highly personal: some viewers could react to Campion’s “sartorial ostentatious” (Garrett 53) as a remark concerning the progress made, others could sneer at the aesthetic and technological abyss between past and present to recall how little has changed with regards to sexual morae and “notions of female independence, aspiration and achievement” (Garrett 53) since then.



Fig. 7. Selected shots from the opening sequence in The Portrait of a Lady.

The unnamed girls in the opening scene, with their comfortable clothes, practical hairstyles and late twentieth century appliances (one of them dances to the music she is listening through her headphones, plugged into a walkman) may exist light heartedly in front on the camera – the eye that vouches for their girly radiance (see fig. 7). Still, their spatial closeness (in filmic terms) to Isabel Archer’s distressed existence bridges the gap and interconnects the risks (of abuse, violence, or mere disappointment) that monothematic notions of romantic heterosexuality expose women to.

The operation that Campion sets up with her *Portrait* is one of distortion rather than representation, especially with regards to genre expectations: the *Bildungsroman* narrative arc is betrayed – Isabel’s learning curve plummets after her marriage with Osmond – yet the effort to *portray* her, or any other character, to *frame* them within an intelligible perspective that could account for their lives and choices, is consistently hindered by movement. Belén Vidal borrows Pascal Bonitzer’s keyword *décadage*⁴⁸ – the idea that modern/modernist uses of frame in cinema debunk its conventional use as a window-frame, thus hindering direct, crystal-clear appraisal of the subject it purportedly encloses (and therefore challenging their very subjectivity) – to broach her analysis of *Portrait* in *Figuring the Past. Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (2012).

The Portrait of a Lady plays up the motif of the tableau/portrait as a precarious, shifting figure, haunted by its reverse: the deframing. Like the close-up, the film deframing suggests fragmentation and distortion of perspective – the trace of motion that characterises the variable eye of cinema. (Vidal 133)

Vidal’s *Portrait* analysis is part of a broader exploration of the the aesthetics of period film adaptations: the image/idea of past that films such as *Portrait* evoke is one that does not pursue authenticity, but is, rather, a rewritten version, a *pastiche* that links together past ideas of representation and the history of representational conventions (Vidal 126). The mode, therefore, is mannerist, a reprise of certain well-known models

⁴⁸ Pascal Bonitzer expounds on the theme of framing/deframing as a common stylistic practice in both visual arts and cinema in his 1985 essay *Décadages. Peinture et cinéma*.

as the basis of new articulation.⁴⁹ The realm that a film such as *Portrait* inhabits is, in fact, that of potentiality, where a “ready-made scenario” (Vidal 129) is at the heart of narrative and textual negotiations that convey original frameworks: “Past and present cease to be stable, mutually exclusive points of reference” (Vidal 129). Vidal’s discussion follows closely the character-driven focus of analysis that I mentioned earlier – the use and misuse of Isabel’s body are carefully recorded throughout – but her understanding of Campion’s handling of Isabel’s desire is firmly rooted in the filmic solutions she employs and, specifically, in the cultural connotations that such techniques entail.

The film-within-the-film sequence loosely titled *My Journey* chronicles the *grand tour* to Venice and Egypt that Isabel embarks on, in company of Madame Merle, immediately after Osmond has declared his love to her in Rome (see fig. 8). The sequence is filmed in the style of a mock silent film: grainy sepia tones, syncopated gestures and jumpy succession of postcard-like images provide a comedic effect and build up the parodic tone of the whole passage. The beauty of the sites Isabel travels to is clouded by the many inconveniences of travelling and, increasingly, by Isabel’s distracted engagement with the places she visits, since her mind is set on the memory of Osmond’s declaration. Sight and sound filled with visions of Osmond’s mouth(s) and looping voice: the short film takes a surreal turn to make space for Isabel’s erotic imagination, which soon overpowers her reality and overwhelms the endurance of her body (the sequence ends on Isabel’s fainting fit in the Egyptian desert). Campion shot the sequence at Shepperton Studios (UK), as shown in Peter Long and Kate Ellis’ aforementioned behind-the-scenes documentary *Portrait. Jane Campion and The Portrait of a Lady* (1997). In it, as she is discussing the opening boat deck scene with actors Nicole Kidman and Barbara Hershey, Campion reveals where the inspiration for the *Journey* sequence came from: “I got these ideas from seeing Victorian albums of a picnic.

⁴⁹ Vidal reads *Portrait* through a distinctly positive feminist lens, the “past” that Campion recreates is able, in Vidal’s argument, to evoke and pay tribute to the unspoken histories of evolving female consciousness: “In contrast with images of the feminine that act as index of (masculine) loss, this portrait signals a different attitude towards the past: it re-maps the space of fantasy posed by the romance narrative and mourns the losses strewn along the way in the historical emergence of a feminist consciousness” (140).

Everyone gets out like this, and half the people are out of the shot". Her references, therefore, are linked to vernacular photography, rather than expressly cinematic specimens. The cultural framework Campion is tapping into is one in which the instrumental and popular purpose of cinematographic technology is at its early stages of development from still to motion photography. Vidal insightfully notes the similarity between *My Journey's* subject matter and the topics of the *Actualités*, the 50-second "actuality films" popularised by the Lumière brothers, whose cameramen were able to shoot in locations outside of Europe, such as Asia and Africa. Besides mimicking the documentary value of the silent *actualités*, *My Journey* also picks up on the comic intention that characterises a short film like *European Rest Cure* (1904) by Edwin S. Porter, whose subject is an American citizen on a European *grand tour*. Porter's protagonist, like Isabel, is a tourist rather than an adventurer, the travel experience he is hoping for is one of rest and relaxation – his movement seeks a cure, a distraction, an amusement – but only encounters unexpected obstacles and tiresome inconveniences, which fatigue him, but entertain the viewer.

Campion's creation of faux-antique footage is, nevertheless, conscious of other classic, but better known, works of cinema history. Vidal hints (138), with no further explanations, at the analogies between *My Journey* and iconic films such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) – possibly, the close-up of John Malkovich's lips spelling the sentence "I am absolutely in love with you" is reminiscent of the final close-up of Orson Welles' lips murmuring "Rosebud" – and Luis Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1929) – the juxtaposition and dissolvence of images are similar, and possibly the erotic sequence starting with Osmond's hand clutching Isabel's clothed waist, then switching to a shot of Nicole Kidman's bare chest are akin to Buñuel's protagonist grasping his female co-protagonist's covered breast, which he imagines naked. In addition, I would argue that the cinematic legacy Campion is paying homage to with *My Journey* bears thematic affinity, and laterally, stylistic parallels, with the tradition of German expressionism.



Fig. 8. Selected shots from the “My Journey 1873” sequence in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

The hypnotic spinning of Isabel's striped parasol juxtaposed with Osmond's stern face echoes the fascination with mesmeric tactics as a source of power that is common in expressionist classics such as Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) and Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922). The analogy is semantic rather than strictly visual, since *Portrait* is, to a certain extent, as preoccupied with illustrating strategies of disempowerment, authority as the result of aggregated control through conformity, as in, for instance, Lang's manipulative and scheming Dr. Mabuse, or Wiene's Dr. Caligari's literal use of hypnosis to control sleepwalking Cesare. While Campion's penchant for tilting camera angles, stark contrasts between lit and dark spaces, the use of reflective surfaces to fragment her characters' appearance, as well as the creation of surreal imagery to convey perspective subjectivity, might bear direct similarities to the visual style of German expressionists, the kinship is especially relevant on the level of thematic isotopy. The friction between social acceptability and individual desire – *Portrait's* main moral preoccupation and narrative beating heart – bespeaks the concern for evolving sexual and economic morae for women, in addition to the need for a nomenclature pertaining to such people, whether germinal "New Women" or full-blown "Weimar Girl". Isabel's social angst and romantic dysphoria are loosely reminiscent of the choral obsession for the protagonist's wealth and sexual capital in G. W. Pabst's 1929 silent film *Die Büchse der Pandora*. Lulu (Louise Brooks) desires none of the achievements and experiences that Isabel thinks about: as a semi-professional kept woman, impromptu showgirl, carefree and careless murderer and, eventually, committed sex worker, Lulu embodies a brand of "independence" that Jamesian ethics would frown upon.

Campion's understanding of Isabel, however, is receptive of histories of film lead-ladies whose bodily presence is up for grab (either through cinematic gaze or diegetic touch), and hardly ever encourages an assessment of what sexual appeal does to the person projecting it, rather than merely showing the effects on desiring onlookers. The way the plethora of admirers that besiege both protagonists influences them radically transforms each narrative: while candor seems to shield Lulu from the vehemence of her lovers, Isabel is acutely aware of, and embarrassed by the feelings she arouses and that bounce, often harshly, back at her. The undercurrent of violence unleashed by

unrequitedness clashes with the expectation of gentleness that Isabel ascribes to: accusations of cruelty contribute to demean Isabel's social ease and trust in her peers. This cognitive fracture further problematizes Isabel's core belief in her capability to make choices on her own terms: "[...] But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do" she says to her aunt, "So as to choose" she retorts to her aunt's reply insinuating that she would rather do what she knows she must not attempt (James 70). Louise Brooks – another American in Europe – as Lulu brings iconicity to her character rather than intelligence, her flair covers up the complexities of her predicaments: Lulu's misfortunes sum up too quickly to allow respite, or give her time to assess the best course of action. Nicole Kidman's classical beauty, on the other hand, is soon clouded by her loss of control, for which she blames herself despite poor guidance from the friends who boast more experience and better judgement than her. Both downfalls are disasters of misplaced attention, either too much or too easily distracted by lapses in judgement. While both James and Pabst (via Frank Wedekind's plays on the subject of Lulu, *Erdgeist*, 1895, and *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 1904, the literary sources of the film) seem to join, consequentially, seductive prowess, imaginative ebullience and ethical disaster, Campion resists the cautionary caveats of public liability. Campion notoriously materialises the kiss between Osmond and Isabel in the roman catacombs, but the pressure that Isabel undergoes pertains to the realm of psychological persuasion and emotional illegibility rather than mere physical limitation.

Mind control as abuse of power – a common interest for Campion and her unacknowledged film forebears – also takes the shape, in Campion's iteration, of the control of one's own mind through fantasy. Mental imagery opens up new semiotic spaces that extend the scope of the adaptation, and materialise the sensual/sexual undercurrent of the marriage plot in *Portrait*. The erotic coda of the *Journey* sequence complements the previous soft-core interlude in which Isabel projects a collective intimate encounter between Ralph Touchett, Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood and herself (see fig. 9). Against the backdrop of Isabel's London hotel room, right after she has received an unpleasant visit from her American suitor Caspar Goodwood (and refused his marriage proposal), the scene seamlessly merges Isabel's real life environment with her mental fancy.



Fig. 9. Selected shots from the sex fantasy scene in The Portrait of a Lady.

Campion cleverly uses the erotic in a way that skirts an explicit sex scene: the focus on touch provides hapticity despite the lack of visual availability of “sexual” or “sexually-adjacent” body parts. Still, the narration of intimate, self-determined pleasure flows, and provides further characterization for Isabel – thereby concretizing the unaddressed sexual tensions in *Portrait* – as well as the context for the friction between social acceptability and individual desire that I mentioned earlier. To my knowledge, no other film from the same era achieves similar results with regards to giving a visual form to erotic imagery without the need to show nude bodies, reproductive organs or unequivocally hints at masturbation.

Academic discussions around the theme of film eroticism tend to focus on the scopophilic power of the sexual act only as the “real” encounter between two or more bodies, rather than acknowledge the narrative potential of imaginary sex. Douglas Keeseey’s *Contemporary Erotic Cinema* (2012) calls in the introduction for a more expansive cinematic vocabulary with regards to erotic scenes – in order to include non-normative sexualities, but also to provide images of pleasure that include female orgasms, non-genital sex and “lurid” body parts and hair, so that “other possibilities for sexual satisfaction [become] available” (10) – but the study itself is a compiled list of “standard” erotic scene in mainstream films. Barry Forshaw’s *Sex and Film. The Erotic in British, American and World Cinema* (2015) devotes a chapter to praise the “once-forbidden images as close-ups of vaginas and erect penises” (168) in the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s as a victory of freedom against the prudery of “political correctness”. Still, he proceeds to only indicate as case studies film by mainstream male directors (even when their work deals with homosexual sex and/or relationships) and describe heterosexual coitus as the paramount erotic visual experience, along with the conventionally sexualised presence of women. Forshaw’s facile libertarianism believes that “the ‘male gaze’ at an undressed female is now a default subject for censure” (168) therefore enforcing the idea that visual “maleness” necessarily equates sexualization with objectification (an oversimplification of Laura Mulvey’s terminology that is, to say the least, demeaning towards the male gender), and, furthermore, fully ignoring the possibility that the gaze is mobile, reversible and, most importantly, always looking back. Campion’s elemental gaze twist in *The Piano* showed an “undressed

male” (Harvey Keitel’s famed full-nude scene), but the innovation she achieves in *Portrait* concerns the self-awareness of the female gaze that Campion extensively exercises with her cinema. The vocabulary in use with Isabel’s fantasy scene permits the articulation of intimate, rather than hidden, forms of individual, self-serving pleasure (and not mere desire). Campion keeps her four characters fully clothed in tasteful Victorian garb, thereby eluding censorious remarks, but the small parts of exposed flesh, risqué kisses and suggestive panting are all treated by means of Campion’s trademark haptic up-close cinematography. Peeping, however, is not Campion’s mode: the scopophilia she encourages is not one based on bodies, but on the fantasy within a self-exploring mind. The result is halfway between heritage erotica and pornographic surrealism, but the stress on self-containedness challenges the idea of the what and how obscene the bodily matter on show here is. Linda Williams’ notion of “on/scenity”, as she defines it in the introduction to the anthology *Porn Studies* (2004), could help illuminate the interplay of privacy and self-knowledge that Campion has Isabel to experience in the sex fantasy scene:

The term that I have coined to describe this paradoxical state of affairs is on/scenity: the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene. In Latin, the accepted meaning of the word *obscene* is quite literally “off-stage,” or that which should be kept “out of public view” (*OED*). On/scene is one way of signaling not just that pornographies are proliferating but that once off (*ob*) scene sexual scenarios have been brought onto the public sphere. (3)

Campion twists the conventionally “obscene” nature of cinematic intercourse: while the context ascribes to “standard” visual eroticism – especially in gestural hapticality and auditory allusiveness – the “imaginary” character of the scene highlights the obscenity of private thoughts revealed, rather than that usually associated to the topic of such thoughts.

Genre as a vocabulary of style, as a paramount bearer of cinematic meaning is a recurring interest in Campion’s filmography. A period adaptation like *Portrait* exemplifies her congenial approach to popular narrative schemes, which she adopts and employs

as such, but also reclaims and twists to stress its conventionality. Campion's visual and semantic closeness to contemporary film genres such as the woman's film/chick flick romance, softcore erotica and the heritage costume film itself helps build cinematic familiarity and intelligibility for mainstream audiences. Moreover, it skims over the very history of the medium: the parodic and metacinematic use of obsolete techniques, such as greyscale and silent short films, literally visualise the time span that separates chronologically the film's subject matter – nineteenth century lives before the advent of still and motion photography – from contemporary cinema audiences –made up of women and girls whose public and private lives are understood through different moral lenses. The semiosis of genre that Campion willfully retrieves and reengages produces a filmic text that works on multiple level: as sentimentally-driven piece of entertainment, as an authorial take on a classic novel, or even as a transmedia interpretation of the legacy of its source text, as a political film on the history of female consciousness and public presence. In any case, the popularity of each of these possible reading/watching modes is rooted in their immediate legibility through genre conventions and/or their marketable appeal. The adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady*, from James to Campion, takes into account the full chronological range separating the first, source text from the second, arrival text: James' metaliterary concerns about style, popular genre and their influence on characterial subject matter translate as metacinematic benchmarks, which showcase the history of the medium as technology and highlight its primeval function as popular entertainment. Notions of history and time will remain central in Campion's practice, and in her next attempt at heritage costume film, *Bright Star* in 2009, her literal approach to the binary history/narrative will gain primary focus.

2.4. *Bright Star*: Peripheral Historiography

Campion's return to period adaptation came after a hiatus of over a decade: since *The Portrait of a Lady*, Campion committed to filming original scripts (*Holy Smoke*, 1999), anthological short films (*The Water Diary*, 2006; *The Lady Bug*, 2007), documentary and feature production (*Soft Fruit*, 1999; *Abduction: The Megumi Yokota Story*, 2006), as well as an adaptation from contemporary sources (*In the Cut*, 2003). In a 2009 fragment from a video-interview shot on location during the production of *Bright Star* –

“Interview with *Bright Star* director Jane Campion” – Campion describes how her fascination with Romantic English poet John Keats started with the reading of Andrew Motion’s 1998 biography *Keats*, through which she discovered his real-life affair with next-door neighbour Fanny Brawne. The interview setup mimics Campion’s own styling in *Bright Star* – she sits on a wooden chair propped in the middle of a leafy garden, a flowery twig in her hand, like her own Keats (Ben Whishaw) does to draft his “Ode to a Nightingale” – which she begrudgingly describes as a biopic. Campion felt she “needed an angle” on Keats’ life story that could free her film from the biographical framework: the idea of framing Keats through Fanny’s perspective, so that audiences could be introduced to him “through the love affair”, did not come quickly or easily. Historical knowledge about Fanny’s own side of the story is limited to her (scarce) letters and laconic diary entries – “Mr. Keats left Hampstead” Campion recalls Fanny writing in her diary after Keats’ departure for Rome – and Campion built her own narrative around those few proven details in order to “not contradict any known facts about them”, rather than bend them to her convenience. In another interview, a 2009 online conversation with Anne Thompson, Campion clearly states:

[...] It took a while to figure out the history with the timeline. I didn’t want to write a romantic drama, but a character story within the parameters of what happened. Not, ‘how can I make this the most extraordinary?’ I really didn’t do that. There were a couple of pieces of license. I doubt if they really were sleeping wall-to-wall. (Thompson)

This section aims to assess Campion’s evolving historical adaptation practice by describing her propensity to favour looseness over orthodoxy in treating her subject matter, imaginative rereading rather than loyal retelling, her penchant for non-literary sources such as letters, diary entries and corollary research texts. Overall, Campion’s approach to the biopic, as genre and as commentary, is a bold flexion of standardized historiography and conventional treatment of a canonical poet’s life background.

Campion’s *Bright Star* fictionalises a plausible version of the meeting between Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and John Keats (Ben Whishaw), setting it in the autumn of 1818 in Hampstead Village, London. Charles Armitage Brown (Paul Schneider) rents out part of his house, Wentworth Place, to Fanny’s mother (Kerry Fox), who moves in

with her three children, Fanny, the eldest, Samuel (Thomas Sangster) and Toots (Eddie Martin). Keats, who lives in the town-centre nearby and assiduously frequents Brown's house: the two are friends, they discuss literature and write poetry together. The acquaintance between all parties is further fostered by the Dilke family, who frequently call on both the Brawnes and Mr. Brown. The shared house in Hampstead Village becomes the cornerstone of the ensuing two-and-a-half years of friendship between the families and love between young Keats and Fanny, its domestic life plus scenes of manual and intellectual productivity propel the plot as accurately as Campion's illustrative use of the seasons to help audiences orient chronologically. Most importantly, the fixedness of the set reflects Fanny's limited experience of the world and society outside of the home, thus lifting her constrained perspective as the primary narrative force of the film.

Campion's Keats is Fanny's Keats: his travels, holidays, meetings with literary peers other than Brown, even his devoted care to his sickly brother Tom are filtered through Fanny's direct testimony and what she imagines according to his scant descriptions. Their romantic attachment is framed as a committed relationship that the two lovers intend to formalise in marriage, despite the stark disapproval (and express intervention to separate them) they endure from their entourage. While Fanny's mother and her friend Mrs. Dilke attempt to dissuade her from marrying Keats on the basis of his precarious income, Mr. Brown even attempts to discredit Fanny to Keats' eyes by openly flirting with her. Despite the unencouraging environment, Fanny, in order to spend time together, asks Keats to teach her how to write poetry and direct her reading habits. Meanwhile, she maintains and refines her manual skills as a seamstress and self-taught tailor, producing highly original and showy outfits for herself (besides a masterful embroidered pillowslip she stitches as an homage to mourn Keats' brother's death). Whereas no dialogue acknowledges the equal level of craftsmanship displayed by both Keats' poetry and Fanny's needlework, Campion's overall framework clearly equates the two activities as serious and artistic endeavours, consequently elevating Fanny as a worthy partner for Keats. Campion follows the love story to its unhappy closure, with Keats' departure for Rome in the autumn of 1821, where he hoped the warmer weather would assuage his tuberculosis. The closing sequence of the film sees

a bereaved Fanny, in a black mourning attire, walking in the woods around her house reciting to herself verses from Keats' sonnet *Bright Star*.

A Keats scholar, Sarah Wootton, is quoted in Michael O'Neill's review of *John Keats: A New Life* – a 2012 biography by Nicholas Roe – describing a specific scene in *Bright Star*: the private conversation between Brown and Keats about the latter's new poetry. Brown's admiration of Keats' work expressed by holding his hand, addressing it as the primary actor of Keats' poetic penmanship. Wootton reads Campion's scene through its "lingering camerawork" (173), and understands it as an example of biographical cinema's shortcomings ("haunting inadequacy" 173) in illustrating written poetry by means of the exploration of the quotidian circumstances of its author's life and work. Nevertheless, the same scene is also instrumental in shedding a light on the "shared constituents of existence" (Wootton qtd. in O'Neill 173) that inform the work of the poet, while simultaneously reinforcing their presence in their time, and singling out their unique characters despite their time. Material poetry-writing, in fact, holds a central role in Campion's mise-en-scene, so much so that intellectual discussions *about* the poetry itself (besides quotations from the actual poems) fill many dialogues and, consequently, inform the film's literary theoretical takeaway.

Neil Vickers notes in his 2009 critical review of the film that direct excerpts from Keats' work are woven in as didactic principles during the poetry lessons scenes. Keats' self-examining analysis contained in his letters, especially those written in 1817 and 1818 about the nature of poetry, are especially useful to Campion in order to distill the Keatsian philosophy she is interested in portraying filmically: "He recycles a famous line from a letter to the publisher John Taylor: 'If poetry comes not as naturally as Leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all'" (Vickers 322). Campion insists on a conception of poetry – as well as the poetic authorship she imaginatively reconstructs – that tentatively echoes Keats' concept of "Negative Capability", a stance that Campion rephrases as a rejection of full understandings, as the enjoyment of formlessness and ambiguity, as the pleasure of a sensuous experience: "The point of diving in a lake is not immediately to swim to the shore; it's to be in the lake. You do not work the lake out. It is an experience beyond thought" is a Campion original insertion that Vickers praises as an apt complement to Keats' own observations (322). John Greenfield (2018) quotes

an excerpt from an interview with Campion for *A.V. Club* in which she expands on her purposeful adaptation of Keats's notion of Negative Capability not just as a dialogic theme, but as a structural principle for the entire filmic enterprise:

I think that concept was important for a lot of us on the film, that idea that great men have a way of managing to stand within doubt and uncertainties, mysteries, without irritably searching after fact or reason. [...] I remember we were discussing it in rehearsal, because we were trying to do something a little bit different. We were trying to create a sense of presence in the actors rather than layering it on. [...] I wanted a *humanness*, so what does that mean, and how do you find it? (Campion qtd. in Greenfield 65)

Bright Star's foremost feature, the fact that Fanny's perspective drives the narrative, heavily influences Keats' portrayal as a poet working within an intellectual network. "Biographical purists", as Vickers names them (323) are likely to deem Campion's choice a fatal misconception of biographical historiography. Hila Shachar's *Bright Star* section in her "Authorial Histories. The Historical Film and the Literary Biopic" chapter (in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, eds. Rosenstone and Parvulescu, 2013) addresses the issues as a relevant contingency, which, however, does not undermine the overall value of the film as an insightful reflection on the life of John Keats. Shachar names Keats scholar Christopher Ricks' "scathing review" ("Undermining Keats", published by *The New York Review of Books* in 2009) as the primeval example of the sceptical critical current against *Bright Star*: "Ricks argues that, while the film's focus on Fanny Brawne demonstrates Campion's 'perception' as a filmmaker, it 'does not respect John Keats.' Ricks's attack on *Bright Star* is primarily concerned with how the film represents (or does not represent) Keats and his work." (205). Paul Thomas sneering 2010 review "Brown vs. Brawne: *Bright Star*" similarly picks apart Campion's film by positing its female-oriented streak as inherently ludicrous, finding fault in its "muddy chronology" (10), besides lamenting its supposedly misleading character: "[...] a film that confounds audiences expectations by deliberately not setting out to enhance anyone's appreciation of Keats's poetry" (10). Thomas also remarks – rather tritely – that Campion's worst shortcoming is indeed her choice (which Thomas finds trite in turn) to center the narrative on Fanny, therefore making her "one of Campion's strong,

complicated women” (10). Thomas does not miss the opportunity to remind what Fanny really is: “Keats’s ‘minxtress’” whose silly “fashionista tendencies” (11) take pride in the outfits she never wears twice (10). Thomas does, however, remark positively on Campion’s tongue-in-cheek caricature of pompous intellectualism by way of Mr. Brown, which points out the “[...] dark side, pontification and bullying of Brown” (13) that a purely heritage biopic would miss. Thomas speaks against literary critics’ tendency to “treat [Keats’s] ‘life and times’ in a proprietary manner, as though these really were Keats’s and Keats’s alone” (13), a stance as arbitrary as any other, which Campion eschews by casting her Keats as just one life, albeit uncommon, surrounded by many others in a limited space and time, thus making up a “live-in world” (13) instead of a solo, aggrandizing portrait. Regardless of orthodox, quasi-hagiographic accounts the poet’s life, Vickers’ reminders that the feminine, domestic viewpoint Campion adopted is structurally unable to acknowledge Keats’ “grander connections”:

There is no mention of his friendships with Hazlitt or the Shelleys or the painter Benjamin Haydon, who inspired his famous sonnet on the Elgin Marbles, or of his meetings with Wordsworth, Lamb and Coleridge – presumably because none of these people were part of Keats’s life with Fanny. (322)

Gender clashing plays a major role in the understanding of Keats as a person of his time, even before his assessment as an intellectual figure. Greenfield provides a general overview of the shifting perceptions of Keats on the basis of his presumed gender bending potentialities. Greenfield’s statement that “Keats’s gender orientation has been in question ever since his own time” (67) risks, unfortunately, to create confusion between his subject’s sexual orientation and gender identity – whose evaluation according to current definitions I find unethical as well as unfeasible. Greenfield’s discussion is indeed informative, but also demonstrates a biased tendency to relieve Keats from accusations of “effeminacy” – such as “William Hazlitt’s essay “On Effeminacy of Character”, “in which Hazlitt associates the state with an overwrought sensibility and a predilection for dreamy indolence” (67). The fact that “effeminate” is used as a synonym for “weak” throughout the reception history of Keats is not disputed by Greenfield, not even when he acknowledges that modern scholarship prefers to

indicate a connection between “weakness” and Keats’ lung consumption (67). Camille Paglia’s critical arguments in *Sexual Personae* about the feminine quality of Keats’ poetic persona in his texts are quoted, as if they were biographical evidence, alongside a 1950’s biographer’s – Lionel Trilling – guarantee that letter-writing did not make Keats any less manly (Greenfield 67). In fact, “Trilling notes that Keats eagerly participated in manly activities with his male companions [...]” (Greenfield 67).⁵⁰ Campion’s choice to cast Ben Whishaw – an androgynous, small-framed actor, who is also openly gay – as Keats is very likely informed by such debates. Moreover, Campion attempts a stylisation of contrasting types of masculinity, a somewhat “gentler” one embodied by Keats, and a conventionally “boisterous” personality via Paul Scheinder’s performance as Charles Armitage Brown. Keats is respectful, quiet and open to treating women as peers, as much as Brown boasts his power through flirting, mockery, seduction and irritating monkey impressions. Campion’s Keats’ peacefulness, moreover, serves a precise purpose in her narrative: romantic attraction is portrayed as a generative, fundamentally positive force in the film, a state of being rather than a temporary elation, which is majorly responsible for Keats’ productivity spike following a bereavement. Vickers (2009), however, points out a factual discrepancy between Campion’s Keats’ philosophy of contentedness and the historical Keats’ shifting beliefs in response to personal occurrences. It is generally accepted among Keats and Romanticism scholars that Keats’ brother Tom’s death in 1818 signalled a caesura from his earlier juxtaposition of ethics and beauty as a viable refuge from existential tragedy, and a subsequent evolution of his philosophy:

⁵⁰ Greenfield’s uncritical quotations from Trilling’s Keats biography – *The Opposing Self* (Viking, 1955) – signal an outdated compliance with an obsolete notion of gender identity that conflates (binary) masculinity or femininity with specific personality traits or active actions. Greenfield’s full paragraph about Trilling’s Keats run thus:

In the 1950s Lionel Trilling addressed the question of Keats’s masculinity, arguing against the prevailing Victorian view that the letters, especially the love letters, made Keats appear unmanly, citing Keats’s heroism, his enthusiasm and defense of poetry, and especially his ‘geniality’, evidenced by his ability to joke with his friends, his self-deprecating sense of humor, his tolerance of others’ foibles, his genuine love of family, and the expectations of Regency manners. (67)

His famous journal letter to the George Keatses of February-May 1818: “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the Heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” A soul in perpetual delight cannot grow; but a soul schooled in tragedy can. (Vickers 323)

The poetry Keats wrote while sentimentally committed to Fanny Brawne, therefore, would have likely been written during this later, more sombre phase. It is the “falling in love” as poetic and existential propeller that interests Campion, along with the sentimental candor and generative energy it spins:

The Keats Campion most admires is the Keats who championed spontaneity and identity-lessness as ultimate poetic values. [...] As a poetic philosophy it is very well adapted to Campion’s purposes because it enables her to link the process of writing poetry with that of falling in love. The two activities are extensions of one another in the film. (Vickers 323)

As an analogy between poetry-making and love-feeling, Vickers argues, *Bright Star* is successful and accurate. Perhaps Campion’s *Bright Star* is the first contemporary creative work in which the loving counterpart, Fanny Brawne, is fully explored as an equal component in the relationship. As Greenfield notes in his essay “Jane Campion’s *Bright Star*: The Disputed Biographies of John Keats and Fanny Brawne” (2009), Keats’ (male) network of friends and collaborators would not approve of Fanny, whom they deemed “unworthy”:

Andrew Motion’s biography, which Campion acknowledges as one of her prime sources, observes that Keats felt he had to walk a fine line with his friends concerning his relationship with Fanny for two, probably related, reasons: they thought her education rendered her not worthy as a companion for a poet of Keats’s reading and poetic sensibility; and they were jealous that Keats was devoted to her over their company at times. (Greenfield 65)

Greenfield also mentions that “Both Brown’s reminiscence in 1836 and Mockton Milnes in his 1848 biography of Keats suppressed Keats’s letters to Fanny and downplayed his

relationship with Fanny” and it was not until the publication of Keats’ own surviving epistolary to Fanny in 1878 that her role and character started to be reevaluated (66). Until Fanny’s letters to Keats’ sister Fanny were disclosed to the public in 1936, the authenticity of her feelings for Keats and the severe blows that his death caused her were inconceivable.

Elizabeth Zauderer’s research review of *Bright Star* (2014) also engages with quotations from Keats’ poetic work scattered in Campion’s film, and her arbitrary employment of a certain Keatsian philosophy to propel her engendered narrative orientations. Specifically, Zauderer compares the illustration of subjecthood in Keats’ long poem *The Eve of St. Agnes* with Campion’s prioritising of Fanny’s perspective as an instance of successful translation of “the poet’s rhetoric imagination” (291). Zauderer’s crucial argument is that Campion adapts cinematically Keats’ poetics rather than his poetry, as loose quotations from works that span his whole career “punctuate” (291) the film and are interspersed with Campion’s supplementary original script lines. Intermedia translation also happens on the level of genre, as Campion reiterates melodramatic narrative tropes, which are a staple of her cinema, on the basis of the the melodramatic subject matter in *The Eve of St. Agnes*: the binary dynamics of “engendered desiring subjectivities” (292-3) is at once reinstated and reversed, as well as the foundational combination of fictionality and visuality.

In a letter to his brother Tom of June 1818 while on tour of the Lake District and Scotland, Keats recounts the effect the natural landscape had on his imagination as a composite moment of retrospection and projection: “The space, the magnitude of mountains and waterfalls are well imagined before one sees them... I never forgot myself so completely—I live in the eye; and my imagination, surpassed is at rest”. (Zauderer 297)

Zauderer employs Keats’ epistolary observations to discuss his complementary understanding of imagination – as a prefigurative act, a fictional discourse, “a composite of the prefigured imagination and vision (302) – as antecedent, yet still part of his experience of reality. Campion recognises and works within this compresence of observation and projection, and her transposition encapsulates “Keats’s conception of

the imagination, and its expression in art, as originating in everyday experiences and their effect on the senses” (Zauderer 299). The domestic realm that Fanny thrives in – her sewing practice, her mother’s impeccable management of the household, their non-conflictual adherence to gender roles – serves this purpose: the materiality of the Brawne family’s everyday life is a working backdrop that doubles as a fertile site for a feminine form of artistic expression in competition with “male” poetic expression. “Campion endows Fanny with a superior talent for stitching to correspond to Keats’s talent for writing” (66) similarly notes Greenfield. Given that the poetry is but a complementary component of the creative force that Campion is interested in exploring, the material aspects of the verbal, textile, domestic and sentimental creations displayed in *Bright Star*, as well as their visual significance within film semiosis, are worth discussing.

The controlled world that Campion imagined for *Bright Star*, a system respectful of historical evidence and compliant with the chronological limits of Keats’ biography, still claims full autonomy when it comes to delivering the everyday conditions underpinning the origin and growth of a love story between young people. Campion’s licenses do not disrupt verisimilitude, which she creates on the level of narrative, not reliability. By showing her character engaging in manual, material activities Campion seems to create a language of unspoken connection between characters and their context. Moreover, the specific aesthetics she builds around said activities provide plentiful insight into her filmic scope and strategy. As Hilary Neroni states in her essay “Following the Impossible Road to Female Passion: Psychoanalysis, the Mundane, and the Films of Jane Campion” (2012), “[...] form, in the Campion film, attempts to express something essential about content” (290). In her filmography, Campion’s portrayal of “passion” (which Neroni understands as the individual search for pleasure, knowledge or meaning, not strictly in sexual/sensual terms) is “anti-progressive” (291), it does not lead to a conclusive end (such as fame, a public concert, a book, recognition of one’s proficiency from one’s peers, etcetera). Rather, it “grabs hold of the subject” (Neroni 292), it disrupts and bends the narrative arch, it is not ancillary to it, or its primary end result. If notions like creative careers, goal-oriented artistic work, public recognition are alien to Campion’s films, the implications for biopics such as *An Angel At My Table* and

Bright Star are seismic: what makes an individual's life trajectory worthy of retelling, in Campion's world, is detached from conventional expectations about canonical, famous biographies. There are no "culminations" in Campion, rather, "Campion's films set the stage for the intersection of the main characters' passion and the social world" (Neroni 291). Fanny's sewing, in fact, is in keeping with Neroni's appraisal of Campion's interest in the mundane side of life:

It is instead a passion that has no goal outside of itself and yet is essential to how the main character creates and finds meaning in the world. The way she expresses her passion is an expression of her own singularity as a subject, whether through art, writing, sex, religion, or whatever activity she privileges. (291)

In an early sequence in *Bright Star*, Fanny rebukes Keats and his mentor, Mr. Brown, by stating boldly that "My stitching has more merit and admirers than your two scribblings put together. And I can make money from it". Fanny's sartorial talent is consistently displayed in parallel with John Keats' poetic research and drafting, so much so that *Bright Star* seems to stand for a speculative double portrayal, based on the fact that, despite the fact that John Keats' written work survived the passing of time, unlike Fanny's (alleged) sewed work, their union was a siding of equally creative brains. Campion's *Bright Star* resorts to the "biopic" label only to establish an intelligible framework, but actively works against the genre from the inside: Campion's intellectual history is certainly receptive to conventional tropes, it is also, however, distinctly revisionist in its feminine bent. *Bright Star* is grounded in historiographic research (especially Andrew Motion's biography), as well as in Campion's personal readings of Keats' correspondence and poetry. In the preface she penned for a slim paperback edition of the love epistolary and poetry Keats wrote to and inspired by Fanny (*So Bright and Delicate*, 2009), Campion writes:

Soon I was reading back and forth between Keats's letters and his poems. The letters were fresh, intimate and irreverent, as though he was present and speaking. They were also intense with his own philosophy, such as 'The vale of Soul-making', or 'Negative Capability'. The Keats spell went very deep for me. I finally wrote a screenplay of the love affair from Fanny's point of view, entitled *Bright Star*. (xv)

The film *Bright Star*, however, does not follow or imitate Keats' letters' gradual shedding of grandiose, rambling declarations as they turn in time into quieter notes on daily life, calmer observations on the couple's shared feelings. Campion's (and Ben Whishaw's) Keats is a fresh-eyed, energetic young man who will often interrupt poetic musings to play with the children, or pretend to be a bee in order to "[sniff] all the flowers in the garden to try and find the best scent". Abbie Cornish's Fanny becomes a flippant young woman who likes to brag about her clothes and does not shy away from witty quarrels with adults, or petty bickering with her siblings. Campion's almost exclusive attention towards her young characters – Campion mentions⁵¹ her daughter Alice Englert as an inspiration for Fanny's youthful flair and passionate reactions to what the adults around her want for and from her – is a constant reminder that Keats' philosophy is steeped in his youth. Likewise, his and Fanny's sorrows are (in part) direct consequences of their backgrounds and family arrangements.

In *Jane Campion and Adaptation: Angels, Demons and Unsettling Voices* (2013), Estella Tincknell accepts the notion that, as a genre, biopic can be fruitfully manipulated in order to recalibrate its traditional focus on straightforward, individual life narratives and open it up to more fluctuating ideas of identity making (110). Hagiographic, triumphalist narratives centred on politically powerful figures – usually *male* monarchs and rulers, *canonical* thinkers and artists – have been playfully turned upon themselves from the 1980s onwards, Tincknell notes (110). A shift in tone speaks to a newfound need to revisit stories from the past not necessarily in a revisionist, or unhistorical approach, but rather as an escamotage to explore themes such as power and influence (110). *Bright Star* is fully in line with such trends: the figure of Romantic poet John Keats "[...] is rendered a secondary figure within his own life story, with Fanny Brawne occupying the role of central protagonist, but he is reimagined in the context of contemporary masculinity" (Tincknell 111).

⁵¹ "Interview with *Bright Star* director Jane Campion" YouTube video interview fragment.

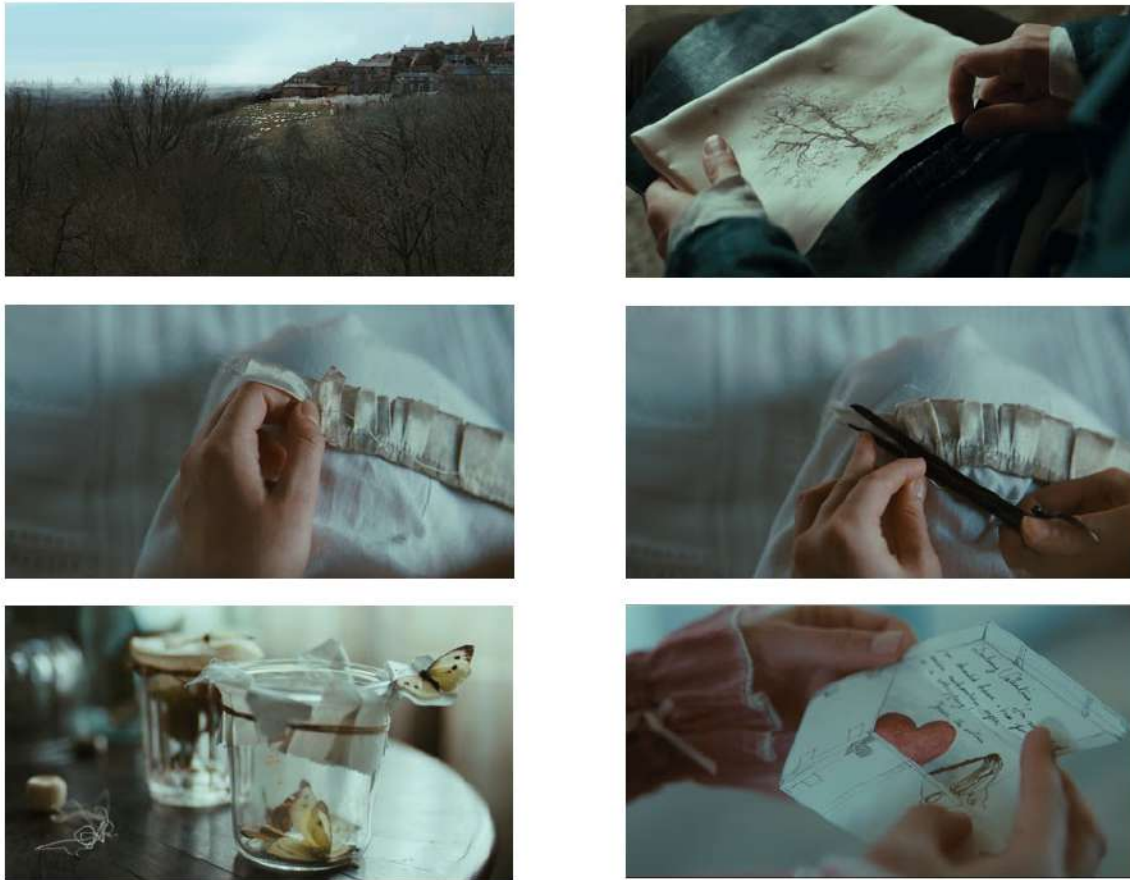


Fig. 10. “Prettiness” in *Campion’s* visual vocabulary includes the potentiality of its own demise: the quaint village bound to be absorbed as a London sprawl; beautiful embroidery as a condolence gift; cutting instruments that are paramount to sewing; butterflies unable to survive in captivity, the unrequited valentine letter sent as a mockery.

Keats thus becomes a penniless, self-deprecating scribbler, devoid of any inkling of his future success, who builds his identity not within a gender binary against the ultra-feminine Fanny, but rather side by side with his cantankerous, misogynist patron Mr. Brown. As Tincknell incisively notes, the love object weighing down *Campion’s* (signature) love triangle is Keats himself: while mapping the heterosexual, romantic bond between Keats and Fanny is the explicit concern of the film, the homosocial friendship keeping Keats and Brown close is a less evident, yet highly incisive presence (113). The fake valentine letter Fanny receives anonymously from Mr. Brown, in addition to their customary witty confrontations over tea, puts on display the tensions among the

trio: the courtly disguise adopted by Brown to harass and undermine Fanny to Keats' eyes is all the more uncanny (and successful) as it channels jealousy and aversion within conventional patterns of seduction. *Bright Star* seems, in fact, to explore topics and tropes pertaining to the comedy of manners since Campion carefully inserts nuances of feelings other than romantic ones, such as filial and fraternal love, friendship and communal assistance among neighbour families. The creation and evolution of bonds between characters are in no way secondary to the love story in the foreground, on the contrary, interactions such as those occurring between Fanny's mother and Mrs. Dilke, Mr. Brown and his housemaid Abigail, or among Fanny's siblings, provide depth and context to Keats and Fanny's one. It is a context that is explicitly oriented towards, and shaped by, economic matters and conversations entering around money, income, rent, property, financial help. It is no coincidence that Fanny's statement about her fashion design and production as being more than a crafty hobby, but a real business, happens during a squabble with Mr. Brown, Keats's host and patron. The tension at the centre of *Bright Star* is not so much romantic distress, rather a fully-fledged conflict between art making as a laudable, but non lucrative occupation, and the compromise demanded by reciprocal societal participation.

Campion's onscreen aesthetics are key in addressing and critically exposing these themes while simultaneously delivering a pleasurable visual repository. Campion's attention to objects – especially everyday, commonplace ones – and their handling is fulfilled by means of her signature haptic and zoomed-in imagery. The desaturated beauty and the distinctly feminine character associated with the objects and gestures Campion chooses to focus on – mostly female hands actively managing cooking, sewing and other domestic tasks, besides engaging in experiential touch – can be usefully explored as a specific aesthetic mode (see fig. 10). My earlier discussion of Sianne Ngai's "marginal aesthetic categories" in the chapter section on *The Piano* is equally relevant here: Ngai's key intuition in her treatment of aesthetic categories is the description of their intersubjective capacities, that is, the fact that certain ways to relate to subjects "other" than oneself is an act that, in addition to being framed ideologically and historically, is also embedded within an aesthetic stance. Ngai describes forms of fetishism and commodification that are usually linked to "cuteness": exchange value that

tends to “homogenize labour and its experience” (63) and ideas pertaining to “political inconsequentiality, limited range of action as well as a restricted production” (97).

Furthermore, Ngai’s critique takes into account forms of desire, exploitation, destruction directed at those “objects” that the onlooker perceives as familiar, harmless, possibly delicate and highly controllable. Ngai’s idea of prettiness, therefore, scales down from beauty insofar as the attitude it inspires is not one of awe and/or fascination, but rather a dual, contrasting urge to simultaneously affect and protect the “cute” object at hand. This dual outcome is also particularly enlightening when it comes to understanding Campion’s key employment of specific objects – such as quaint natural ambiances, twee lacey bonnets, pastel-coloured earthenware, petite furniture and sweet shades of sunlight peeking through linen curtains – to foster, underline and criticise the interpersonal relations and bonds the main narrative line explores (see fig. 11). While Campion attempts to dignify the endearing and the crushable – especially when it pertains to women’s lives and work – what is most interesting is how she combines the aesthetic and the affective in a complex web: the past may be imaginary, but the hindsight that both film creators and film viewers possess cannot but influence its understanding. It is not merely the swift, cruel turn from a beautiful indoor collection of living butterflies to the spectacle of dead wings on the floor and under glass jars. I, personally, when reading the name “Hampstead Village” in the opening sequence, and watching the quaint village uphill, cannot but think of the englobing gentrification that will affect the countryside around London in the two hundred years following 1818. I cannot but remind myself constantly, while watching the film, that I am offered the fantasy of a lifetime, spent writing in cosy sitting rooms or sitting under tree branches, tainted by a fatal disease.



Fig. 11. Instances of domestic, artistic, intellectual and manual labour in *Bright Star*.

The manifold semantics traceable in Campion’s employment of an array of material signifiers for tenderness, powerlessness, a crushable nature and commodifiable sentimentalism are at once undermined and confirmed by Campion herself. In a 2010 Q&A interview for webzine *Female First*, Campion states her disdain for overtly cute, explicitly period-piece imagery:

My designer and I were both quite anti-romantic, and we were going, ‘Oh, they look like hamsters dressed up!’ For me, it was alienating to begin with. To see my young actors, who had just been in their normal clothes rehearsing, and suddenly they’re in these ridiculous costumes! [...] It wasn’t like, ‘Oh, how gorgeous look at that scene!’ I don’t feel any desire to fetishize the period quality of the costumes.

Tincknell situates the relevance of sewing and dress-making in *Bright Star* primarily as a feature of costume design, although she admits that costume is particularly apt in imposing meaning, rather than simply complementing narratives (82-3). Costume design and fashion-related issues are, however, key in understanding *Bright Star*, especially on the level of narrative development. Tincknell senses that, through consistent camera-work zooming in on stitches, fabric folds, feminine hands at work, “[...] clear parallels are drawn between stitching and writing, between the craft of sewing and the craft of poetry composition, between feminine creativity and masculine art” (82-3). Campion’s insistent gaze on this particular form of domestic work, however, has wider resonances, especially on the level of resulting effects. *Bright Star* opens on a full close-up of a thumb threading a needle with a light blue piece of string, then sticking a piece of fabric until the needle pierces its surface. More details pile up as the camera opens the larger piece of sewing, as each twist of thread and cloth merges in a larger chain of stitches running along a garment’s rim. Campion’s opening sequence finally allows human presence as well as establishing the focus of the entire film: protagonist Fanny Brawne is stitching in her nightgown propped next to her bedroom window, a space she shares with her little sister Toot, who silently watches her sister work in the early morning light (see fig. 12). However, the sharpness and accuracy intrinsic to the materiality of the feminine arts is fully described through the tearing sounds of fabrics being shredded or ripped apart, by hand or with scissors, as well as by the frequent inclusion of hand movements that stitch, embroider and lace up ribbons. As stated in her preface to the 2009 paperback edition of the *Love Letters and Poems of John Keats to Fanny Brawne*, Campion endeavours to write “a screenplay of the love affair from Fanny’s point of view” (*So Bright* introduction xv), and *Bright Star* as a whole seems to fully develop such privileged perspective.



Fig. 12. Selected stills from the opening sequence: the extreme up close on the needle being threaded, the cloth being perforated and the thread passing through the fabric gradually shrinks back to a wider view of the mending taking place and Fanny performing it in her bedroom.

In *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, a historical review of the fluctuating social values attached to embroidery, Rozsika Parker notes that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, “women of all class embroidered” (148). What differed dramatically from one class to another was the purpose and meaning ascribed to such activity: a leisurely hobby for respectable ladies, a draining form of domestic-based professionalism for working-class women. Sewing worked, at once, as a signifier of femininity and an educational tool to teach “piety, feeling, taste, and domestic devotion” (Parker 164) to privileged as well as to working class women. Campion’s Fanny Brawne, interestingly, sits in an original position: she is shown not

merely spending her time embroidering decorations, but actually giving full fledge to her creative powers by designing and sewing her clothes. Much like *The Piano's* Ada, Fanny also develops her manual proficiency within a material realm that is coded as “feminine” and “demure” beyond its “respectable” limit, transcending her activity from the amateurish commonplace up to a professional, artistic level. What is even more peculiar about Campion’s Fanny is her straightforward commercial ambition and explicit business flair regarding her hand-made fashion one-woman enterprise. Professional hand embroidery, for instance, was a widely practiced (and encouraged) occupation for women and children by the mid 1800s, but it was also low-paying, arduous work (Parker 175). Lace runners, Parker records, would experience blindness and other physical ailments from a young age, and any efforts to unionise in order to improve their situation failed: by the end of the century their labour had been fully automated and therefore substituted by industrial embroidery machines (175-8). Parker also records late nineteenth century commentators complaining that so-called well-educated women were “unable to sew a button, or cut out and unite the plainest piece of male or female clothing” (156), thus framing embroidery as a kind of women’s work whose importance is primarily symbolic: it testifies and transmits a range of love-like feelings, such as devotion and attachment to one’s household (Parker 155). “Love could not be expressed sexually or passionately, but through the providing of *comfort*” (Parker 154): middle to upper-class households had little room or need for hand and home-made *objects*, women’s time and labour (and affection) would better be employed, materially as well as symbolically, to make the domestic space look and feel comfortable, pretty. Needlework decorations on soft items – slippers, pincushions, chair cushions – is a practice that Fanny also adopts, along with its affectionate connotations, and as a medium of nonverbal communication. An example is the pillow-slip she stays awake all night to embroider as a condolence gift to Keats after the death of his brother: “She sewed it all night long” chimes in Fanny’s little sister as Fanny offers her handmade present.

Róisín Quinn-Lautrefin describes the Victorian understanding of domestic textile craftsmanship as a material site of feminine reflection about time, history and lineage. In her essay “[T]hat pincushion made of crimson satin:’ Embroidery, Discourse and

Memory in Victorian Literature and Culture” (2018), Quinn-Lautrefin contextualises needlework and embroidery within a social landscape that does not recognise women’s right to own, bequeath or inherit property. The creation and decoration of portable and freely exchangeable textiles for oneself or for the home, therefore, supplies the need to inscribe themselves within a legacy and mark their possessions. “Handicrafts were carefully cherished or circulated as gifts, as keepsakes of friendship or romance or as legacies, and were invested with enormous affective value” (Quinn-Lautrefin 10). The class divide within needlework, however, is a foundational issue – “[...] not all women could write, but most could sew” notes Quinn-Lautrefin (8) – as the practical, plain sewing would customarily be assigned to domestic staff in middle to upper class households, whereas the ladies of the house would engage the enormous amount of leisure time at their disposal in decorative fancywork. Embroidery, in this context, is as much a performative act as a productive activity: a handmade object adds to the cozyness of the domestic space just like the image of the stitching house-bound woman contributes to set the scene of drawing-room intimacy. Jane Campion generally adheres to historical verisimilitude, but she cleverly carves a space of narrative development for Fanny via her display of embroidery (as either action and end-result). Needless to say that Campion situates her story in a time that is contemporaneous with a primogenial stage of the industrial innovations that Quinn-Lautrefin describes as paramount to the later cultural understanding of needlework. The displacement of upper middle-class households from city centres to the suburbs, technological improvements in the textile sector, the rapid growth and availability of printed reading materials for popular entertainment and education would all then join to create a specific culture of craft. Magazines providing patterns and instructions for domestic projects would exist alongside standardised designs for grids to stitch along to using cheap, colourful wools, the so-called “Berlin wool work” (Quinn-Lautrefin, 4), conceived and marketed so as to help women produce, quickly and easily, the much-desired textile signifiers of domestic womanhood. Quinn-Lautrefin explains the coexistence between obsolete methods of domestic production with highly efficient industrial supplies as a matter of cultural imitation and sentimental alliance:

By imitating the speed, swiftness and precision of machines, Victorian women could insert themselves within the ethos of capitalist economy, albeit on a miniature scale. While the Victorian ideology of domesticity solidified the assignment of middle-class women to the home, fancywork allowed them to assert their own productivity, metaphorically bringing the factory into the parlour. (5)

Campion's chronological placement of Fanny in a time period at the cusp of mass industrialization of textile production, lends her continuous, near-obsessive hand stitching a formal significance beyond that of normal domestic duty: it grounds Fanny's activity in an irretrievable pastness. There are indeed nostalgic implications in Campion's depiction of domesticity, the idea of stitching as a wholesome activity for good-mannered, yet industrious young ladies. There is, also, space for Campion's idiosyncratic discourse about the origin and nurture of a creative practice, the technicalities of inspiration, the range of one's work's influence. Campion skirts away any mentions of impending mass-produced embroidery craze, on the contrary, she posits Fanny's needlework as pure, unadulterated fancycraft, a highly individual venture, unresponsive to cultural fads. Indeed, no books or periodicals suggesting the impending developments that Quinn-Lautrefin suggests are in sight in *Bright Star*: Fanny's inspiration is drawn from one's head alone, her proficient craftsmanship nurtured on solitary, possibly self-taught practice. Moreover, in stark contrast with Quinn-Lautrefin's notion of needlework as a way to "record embodied memories of [oneself]" (7), Fanny sees her sewing as a pragmatic activity, and contemplates the business side of her practice: she does not merely spin, mark or number her linens to establish her ownership, she creates original textile objects that are embedded with individuality. Fanny's handicraft, therefore, combines features from both social constructions of embroidery and tailoring: her work is a paraprofessional, proficiently-done, highly creative form of leisure; a vocation, however, which is explicitly time-consuming, and also bears a clear business-oriented slant. The visual components of Fanny's sartorial entrepreneurship, however, are pivotal in Campion's narrative strategies. Depictions of work fill up the intervals between dialogues and group scenes: the poets' long hours of creative idleness, however, lend themselves to fewer visual iterations than women's domestic occupations do. Keats might be shown dragging a

chair under a tree's shadow to write, or Brown be caught lying on his study's floor, but neither reach Fanny's range of craft-related gestures and tools, or her mother's relentless show of domestic skilfulness (from ironing, to preparing perfectly decorated pink puddings). Rather than romanticise poetry-making, Campion focuses instead on the specifics of women's activities: their time-consuming nature is put on par with the poets' long hours of "idleness" – "Doing nothing is the musing of the poet" warns Mr. Brown – their gestures or results, however, are never construed as "a thing of beauty". Richard Adelman's essay "Idleness and Creativity: Poetic Disquisitions on Idleness in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century" (collected in *Idleness, Indolence and Leisure in English Literature*, edited by Monika Fludernik and Mirian Nandi, 2014) discusses the intellectual and political friction between the notions of "work" and "idleness" – especially the moral understanding of their material results (or, arguably, lack thereof) – as represented in a series of literary specimens (treatises such as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, letters, and poetry). Adelman includes Keats in his literature review, and quotes from a letter Keats wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds on 19 February 1818, in which he compares the social connections and interactions expected within a community of contemplators, with those created within a group of (conventional) workers.

It has been an old comparison for our urging on — the beehive — however it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee — for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving — no, the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits. The flower, I doubt not, receives a fair guerdon from the Bee — its leaves blush deeper in the next spring — and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? (Keats qtd. in Adelman 187)

Keats, Adelman contends, describes and favours a form of communal existence in which human relationships are born and develop on the basis of mutual encounter and respect, a system that is at odds with the notion of profit-oriented mutuality described and envisaged in economic treatises such as Smith's. "Keats gives those poets' theory of idle contemplation a more direct social inflection. Whereas Cowper and Coleridge imagine the poetic contemplator alone, Keats repeatedly positions him amongst others.

What this achieves is a more thoroughly developed set of alternatives to the economically dominated social relations pictured by Smith and Ferguson” (Adelman 187). Keats posits a style of idleness that is a “delicious, diligent Indolence” which, nevertheless, is responsive to and embedded in a community that encompasses one’s (the poet’s) personal actions/inactions: the opposite of uncritical devotion to labour practice as the sole moral contribution to human progress. “[...] poetry represents simultaneously a focused attack on the stultifying effects of specialised labour and a general exploration of the contemplative worlds ignored by political economy” (Adelman 185). Benefits and rewards, in Keats, pertain to the idler, not to the worker: the passive counterpart receives more, and experiences more pleasure, than its active agent. In the chapter “The Romantic Artist” in *Culture and Society* (1958), Raymond Williams similarly contrasted Adam Smith’s economic observations with commentary from the major poets of the Romantic period, and weaved their (complementary, rather than opposing) insight into their own time within a general appraisal of the evolving meaning of cultural keywords. “Artist”, Williams explains, comes to be understood, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as an individual who is at once entangled and set apart from the common social pool. Keats, for instance, is quoted stating “I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public, or to anything in existence, – but the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of Great Men” (68), which Williams interprets as a critique towards the ongoing marketisation of literature as a commodity rather than a prejudiced rejection of the reading public(s). Williams notes how Adam Smith’s synthesis of intellectual labour as yet another form of employment or business, destined to be carried out by a specialised class of professionals, whose work is destined to be “purchased, in the same manner as shoes or stockings [...]” (54). As ideas about the expansion of market terms to include everything a society is able to think and create, the expectation of a particular “specialization” in the public identity and work of individual intellectuals lead, paradoxically, as Williams contends, to the emphasis, among writers themselves, of the “imaginative” character and value of poetry and the belief in the artist as “a special kind of person” (56). The Romantic notion of “the Poet” who is “by nature indifferent to the crude worldliness and materialism of politics and social affairs” (Williams 48) and solely concerned with the intersection between

individual feelings, “Beauty” and its transcendental truthfulness would trickle-down into the popular contemporary stereotype, which Champion partly confirms and perpetuates. Williams, however, neutralises the assumption that artistic temperament, as understood at the beginning of the nineteenth century, should be at odds with concern for the social world, he describes the moral sensibility of Romantic intellectuals as a holistic system, in which “[...] a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society, and an observation of natural beauty carried a necessary moral reference to the whole and unified life of man” (48). Seemingly misanthropic and classist remarks, such as Keats’ dismissal of the importance of validation for the public, should not be read as indications of a supposed ideal impermeability between artists and readers, rather, as an attempt, which Keats shared with his peers, to resist the subjection of humanity, imagination and mutual relationships to the productive demands of an increasingly industrialised and specializing economy.

The emphasis on love and relationship was necessary not only within the immediate suffering but against the aggressive individualism and the primarily economic relationships which the new society embodied. Emphasis on the creative imagination, similarly, may be seen as an alternative construction of human motive and energy, in contrast with the assumption of the prevailing political economy. (Williams 64)

An appraisal of quotidian empathy that Champion does not fail to infuse in the playfulness and sensitivity she ascribes to *her* Keats. Moreover, the tension between work whose materiality and marketability are unquestionable, such as Fanny’s sewing, and work that is deemed “artistic”, therefore intrinsically alien to the commodification required by the professionalization of the intellectual activity into a trade, is a force that Williams theorises, while Champion enacts and contextualises visually.

Fanny’s sewing as a case study in Champion’s visual aesthetics as narrative strategy is but one example among many other instances of neutralised actions and small, everyday, pretty objects that can be employed as multi-faceted, paradoxical devices. The language of affection can be shaped into poetry, but can also be exploited in order to perpetrate harassment. Shrill and sweet children’s voices are often those that speak the news of death, messages about violence. The young are those more often, and

more aggressively stricken by death and grief. Domestic spaces and the work happening therein enable and encapsulate the violent, exploitative flip side of the delicate and quaint aesthetics that Campion and her production team favour. In order to become a potential income generator, embroidery needs to optimise its design and streamline its production. Kitchen management involves the handling of sharp, cutting tools that can decorate and prepare food, but can also wound. Toot's sweet squealing "Fanny wants a knife. To kill herself" is able to, paradoxically, soothe the dramatic charge of the statement and shrink it to a teenager's melodramatic twaddle. The ironic treatment of young girls' approach to suicide is not limited to the characters involved – Mrs. Brawne and her daughters – but equally serves to juxtapose modern ideas about adolescence and Romantic-like conceptions of sentimentality and death. Toot's soft utterance of foreboding words recurs at strategic joints in the narratives: "A letter for Maman from Italy" she announces as she leaves the potentially fatal missive on the kitchen table; her shrill violin practice is the sound interrupted by the actual fatal news from Rome. Violence, grief and death not only hit and pertain to young people, but are also told, softened, by means of their childish voices and minute appearances. Violent imbalances of power are also made visible and perpetrated by means of small, pretty items, such as Mr. Brown's suitcase-shaped valentine card addressed to Fanny. In it, Mr. Brown wonders whether she is more deserving of "kissing or whipping" for her amber eyes, but the authentic harassment becomes apparent when he reveals that the valentine had been sent as a jest, in order to call out Fanny's flirty persona (and possibly disrupt her commitment to Keats).

The visual treatment of Fanny's embroidery and tailoring skills, its consequential enhancement of the haptic capabilities of gestures and materials, help create a distinctively "pretty" staging. Campion's focus on sewing and its pretty finished products do posit a conventionally peripheral, feminine activity as a legitimate counterpoint to allegedly masculine, "serious" artistic occupations. Campion's frames Keats and Fanny's love story firmly within the domestic space, and, crucially, from Fanny's perspective. As Estella Tincknell notes:

The love affair is consistently told from Fanny's point of view insofar as we are placed firmly within the Brawne household and its relations from this early moment, and thus encounter Keats as the romantic intruder into their established world rather than the more conventional scenario in which woman as desired object disrupts masculine certitude. Here it is Keats' presence that will transform Fanny's hitherto stable existence. (111)

This, however, is but one of the strategies Campion employs in order to reinstate a balance between her protagonists' inward contribution to their love story and outward participation to their living context. The contrast between saccharine aesthetics – such as the employment of flowers, butterflies, embroidered gowns to signal the passing of seasons – and violent acts propelling the narratives – double standards, forced separations, illness and death – is, however, not a clash, but an interconnected whole: what is pretty is not passive, and it already contains within itself its negative potential(s). *Bright Star* seems organised around Campion's see-through presentation of opposites, rather than a complimentary siding of contrasting objects, gestures and relationships. Visually pleasing and sentimentally charged objects, such as embroidered pillow slips and daffodil fields, do not simply mellow the tragic outcomes of the story, rather, they are visual reminders of the violent response against what possess a “tender” appearance, and how effortless their commodification can be.

2.5. Campion's Adaptation Practice

In her 2016 study *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders summarises the general appeal of modern-day adaptation rooted in nineteenth sources as a thematic index that, incidentally, appears as a swift description of the topics Campion tackles in her period filmography:

So the Victorian era proves ripe for appropriation because it highlights many of the overriding concerns of postmodern era: questions of identity; of environmental and genetic conditioning; of repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality; of criminality and violence; of an interest in urbanism and the potentials and possibilities of new

technology; of law and authority; of science and religion; and of the postcolonial legacies of empire. (Sanders 161)

The Piano juxtaposes a series of motifs that are standard traits of canonical British Victorian literature – a marriage plot propelled by power inequalities, woman travelling alone trope, dramatic use of natural environments, the description of melodramatic feelings – within a filmic text that sports the “originality” of its screenplay as its foundational characteristic. The resulting “analogue” (in Whelehan and Cartmell’s definition, a new and independent product stemming from a pre-existing source) embeds its (silent) literary referents alongside medium-specific interventions. Campion is consistent in recurring to her signature visual vocabulary to supplement the untold, intimate, personal insights that connote the plotline: her attention to costume, its active use, its role in contextual variations and its implied historical meanings are a crucial component of her style. Exclusions, however, make up as much of the resulting project as the carefully curated elements that make the final cut: the ancillary relationship between European protagonists and Māori appendixes can simultaneously conceal and subtly indicate the socioeconomic system imposed by British colonial rule in Aotearoa, depending on the historical awareness of the individual critical eye.

The Portrait of a Lady famously sports one crucial “artistic license” – Campion freezes the ending, thus removing the choice Isabel accomplishes in the novel – within an otherwise “faithful” classical adaptation. Campion’s interplay is visible on a level that barely touches the plotline, but drastically increases characterization, insight and the overall telling mode of the film: Campion grafts filmic styles – erotica, turn-of-the-century silent cinema clips, monochrome shots reminiscent of a musical video clip – that add depth to her Portrait insofar as each visual snippet fills in the temporal bracket between the fictional pastness and contemporary viewership, connecting them via a short history of the cinematic medium.

Bright Star also stretches the conventional understanding of the mutual relationship, in adaptive practice, between source and adaptation. As an analogue, Bright Star only needs a few biographical details and a handful quotations from well-known poems to sideline John Keats’ master narrative with his partner Fanny’s bubbly tale of creativity and self-awareness, which Campion invents out of another lack, that of surviving

testimony from Fanny's own perspective. Campion's trademark penchant for hapticality in the visual treatment of her material allows, in ways that are consistent from *The Piano* to *Bright Star*, to command and direct attention towards "minor" details commenting on characterization and integrating narrative developments. In keeping with Muriel Andrin's understanding of close-up as "the determining filmic device" in Campion, as she elaborates in her essay "Her-land: Jane Campion's Cinema, or Another Poetic of the Inner Sense" (in Radner 27-36), the tactical potentiality of these techniques endows the audience's sensorial experience with a primary status in the fruition of the film. Campion's close-up "[...] removes the shot from all spatio-temporal frames of reference, while participating in the flow of the other shots among which it is inscribed" (Andrin 33), thus demanding the sort of sustained attention effort that confers its existence within the narrative the status of an objective clause, an essentially connotative statement.

Campion's approach to adaptation is appropriative insofar as she seldom acknowledges a single, clear-cut source as the departing center in her films: the malleability and variety of the works she references inform what Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn term "the audience's 'palimpsestuous' intertextuality" (21), the possibility to spot more than one sources behind the finished product, in addition to the myriad undeliberate resemblances, in content or genre, with other artistic works. "Part of both the pleasure and the frustration of experiencing an adaptation is the familiarity bred through repetition and memory" (21), note Hutcheon and O'Flynn. The exercise of personal and communal memory – whether stemming from a scopophilic visual streak, or informed by notions of social historiography and literary canonicity – ensures forms of pleasure that, regardless of her attempt to spark empathy and identification through an idea of pastness, are independent from the references Campion concentrates. The following chapter, instead of following a single creator's approach to adaptation, will reverse the focus, centering the adaptation of a single literary source, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, in order to trace the effects at stake and strategies in operation across a diverse number of intermedia and literary transpositions.

Chapter 3

Wuthering Heights: Glasshouse Moors

The daughter is awake, too, and reading *Wuthering Heights*. She is thirteen, and she is irritated that the author has such sympathy for Heathcliff, who abuses his wife and child. What does it mean that he is capable of such passionate love? Is this realistic, or were people just dumber and more romantic back then? She doesn't think that the mean people she knows are the most passionate; they just want to laugh at everything. [...] Sighing, she puts the book down and lies on her back, her arm thrown luxuriantly over her head.

Mary Gaitskill, "Folk Song" from *Don't Cry* (2009)

The only known surviving group portrait of sisters Charlotte, Anne and Emily Brontë has no figurative background. Branwell Brontë, the painting's author, apparently erased his own figure from the composition: in its place stands a yellow column, whose transparency, however, barely covers a man's waistcoat and head profile. Behind the sisters' backs, only oil-blackened canvas. The National Portrait Gallery in London, where the portrait is on public display, dates the picture around 1834, when the siblings' ages ranged from fourteen to eighteen years old. Despite the noteworthy literary careers later undertaken by the serious-looking teenagers in the portrait, the canvas was at one point folded over three times – the visible creases help centre and divide the composition – and placed on top of a cupboard in their Haworth (Yorkshire) family house, and forgotten until the second wife of Reverend A.B. Nicholls' (Charlotte's widower) ostensibly got a thorough round of spring cleaning done, in 1914.⁵² The

⁵² The National Portrait Gallery's online extended catalogue description accompanying *The Brontë Sisters* picture by Patrick Branwell Brontë lists the picture's provenance as a direct purchase, in 1914, from the second Mrs Nicholls, who had recovered the artwork at Haworth Parsonage, where she still lived at the time ("The Brontë Sisters: Anne Brontë; Emily Brontë; Charlotte Brontë - Extended Catalogue Entry").

cultural relevance that the Brontë family has acquired over the years, both as a subject of high-level analysis⁵³ and a popular source of middle-brow escapism⁵⁴ has also come to include – and somehow be inextricably linked with – a certain idea of geographical specificity. Landscape, when mentioned in connection with any Brontë title, but especially with Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, suggests inexorable and unappeasable atmospheric moodiness, an edgy state of being that can, at once, be triggered and soothed by the natural wilderness of the (Yorkshire) moors. While the “rough, common-looking oil painting” – as Elizabeth Gaskell describes it in a 1853 letter⁵⁵

⁵³ Academic output relating to the branch of Brontë studies is too extensive to be fully covered here. A comprehensive census of Brontë scholarship is being compiled by the journal *Brontë Studies* under the general supervision of James Ogden. The first instalment covers scholarly work published in 2000-2005: Ogden, James. “A Brontë Reading List.” *Brontë Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2007, pp. 157-164. At the time of writing, eight more instalments have been published, indexing academic work up to 2015, the latest one being: Ogden, James, et al. “A Brontë Reading List: Part 9.” *Brontë Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2018, pp. 341-355. I shall, however, mention the works that I have found the most useful in approaching the subject. *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, edited by Heather Glen (2002) provided helpful historical and critical context at the early stage of this research. Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2002) is a thorough and accessible overview of Brontëan literature's reception history, in addition to offering useful critical insight into the workings of the so-called “Brontë industry” (spanning from tourism to merchandising). Nancy Armstrong's discussion of the cultural and critical transformations that came to portray the Brontë novels (and especially Emily's) as items which needed to be read primarily in psychological terms, rather than in relationship to history, provided me with much sought-after critical thinking. Her dissatisfaction with the “Brontës' fables of desire” (187) is encapsulated in her 1987 analysis of the political reasons that propelled women's writing from the eighteenth century onwards, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. A later section in this chapter on “landscape on paper” features more sources relating specifically to textual analysis of Emily Brontë's novel.

⁵⁴ The Brontës enjoy a unique position in the canon of British and European letters, since they are simultaneously known as household authors, ever-present on school and university syllabi, as well as paperback comfort reads for any age. Brontë novels, especially the most celebrated *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are customarily, and simultaneously, marketed as children's fiction, adult's classics, and romance novels.

⁵⁵ At the end of September 1853, Elizabeth Gaskell writes a letter to an unknown recipient detailing her memories of visiting Haworth, the Parsonage and Miss Brontë (Charlotte married one year later, in 1854)

reminiscing on her visits at the Parsonage while drafting her hagiographic biography of the eldest Brontë, Charlotte⁵⁶ – alienating the sitters from any reference to the siblings’ Yorkshire homeland and residence, map-like precision has become a given in Brontë itineraries, both literal and literary. Patsy Stoneman approaches the “Brontë myth” as “a matrix of interlocking stories, pictures and emotional atmospheres” (214). The Brontë cultural complex is not simply a literary dynasty, nor a single-headed tradition, rather, it is a cipher drawing together a multitude of cultural spins and twists that rely on a handful of tropes. Ideas related or evocative of sisterhood and spinsterhood, provincial isolation, backyard wilderness feel as true to the Brontë biography as to their literary subject matter.

Other biographical details have become encrusted with the myth: a reclusive, but close-knit family environment, devoted to a sober, austere lifestyle, on the brink of destitution at times, but always managing to keep on the safe side of the poverty line. A reputation for delicate health, a history of premature mourning, an unrewarding experience of the world outside the British islands, and even outside Yorkshire, all play a role in crafting the public, pop personae of the Brontë sisters, and are often pointed at as “factual” counterparts to similar objects and ideas cast in their novels. It is *Wuthering Heights*, among the entire Brontë sisters’ bibliography, the work that has come to signify the erasure of boundaries between fiction and biographical experience, geo-located rural environment and wild lands of fanciful imagination. The struggle for mastery and

following the death of her siblings. The text itself is a pastiche of brief descriptions copied from previous letters. The passage concerned with the group portrait, for instance, is shoehorned between a discussion of Charlotte’s literary characters and Emily’s dog. It reads:

One day, Miss Brontë brought down a rough, common-looking oil-painting, done by her brother, of herself,—a little, rather prim-looking girl of eighteen,—and the two other sisters, girls of 16 and and 14, with cropped hair, and sad, dreamy-looking eyes. (Gaskell 249).

Gaskell’s correspondence was compiled by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard in 1966 in the volume *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell* (1997).

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell’s seminal biography of Charlotte Brontë was first published as *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* in 1857.

control over fellow beings at the heart of the novel (and most film adaptations), however, can also be looked at as a collateral iteration to the broader theme of negative power pursued by Brontë. Dynamics of subjugation involve the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange as well as the inhabitants and their surrounding natural environment: the game of domestication (specifically by juridical law) and violent resistance (or rather, considering the paucity of agricultural lifestyle, a backlash) is a constant, and defining feature in the narrative.

The genealogy of multimedia adaptations based on *Wuthering Heights* makes clear how the lifeline between source and result has, repeatedly, hung on the human plot, specifically, on the emotional trajectories that Brontë's characters trace. William Wyler's 1939 *Wuthering Heights* and Peter Kosminsky's 1992 *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* are, arguably, the best-known adaptations of Brontë's novel, and they both indulge in the relationship subplot that roots the obsession nurtured by the protagonists in their shared experience of a gothic idyll, a form of barren pastoral scenery made of windswept fields and rocky cliffs. Such adaptations might have been instrumental in translating, or creating, a recognizable identity of Brontë's story: a narrative whose focus tends to rest on interpersonal ties, with great relevance granted to the romantic, love-like bond between the novel's protagonists, Heathcliff and Catherine. Locale, atmosphere, natural spaces, geographical specificity, indoor/outdoor dichotomies, companionship and exploitation of animals, however, are all widely employed in the lexicon of classic adaptations, and make up a conspicuous percentage of its cultural entailment. They are, nevertheless, seldom used as guiding or foundational criteria in analysis or comparisons between adaptations of between adaptation-source. Rather than reiterate the anthropocentric critical approach to *Wuthering Heights* (both as literary and filmic work), I experiment with broaching the subject in a circular fashion, focusing on still-life backgrounds rather than on foreground human action to understand how multiple novel-to-film adaptations work and influence each other.

This chapter will attempt, therefore, to trace a (partial) history of the ideas about nature explored and invented in *Wuthering Heights* as a novel, a film, a visual product and cultural cipher. Its first section, "Archaeology of Film Nature", provides a methodological explanation of the eco-critical framework adopted. The main arguments in this section

are informed by real-life consequences that filming geo-specific nature has on local rural and wild spaces. Tackling the lost work of film pioneer A.V. Bramble and the amateur documentaries by Jack Eley and Gordon Riley's (*Emily Jane* and *The Making of Emily Jane*) the section allows for an introductory assessment of the ways in which "nature" is conceptualised and depicted in a visual form, how ideas about what the "open" and the "wild" look like are tamed and commodified into artificial pictures. Given the local flavour that is embedded in the Yorkshire moors imposed on popular conceptions of *Wuthering Heights*, discussions of specifically Northern wilderness as treated in film adaptations will thereby be given immediate space. The second section, "Paper Nature: 'Hewn in a Wild Workshop'" deals with the evidence on paper – i.e. in the literary source – of open wild spaces that are actively described and functionally present in the novel, by providing a close reading of relevant fragments. It also includes a brief exploration of the popular and commercial co-optation of Brontëan tropes in fields that have little to no connection with the arts, such as real estate, and the material consequences of such "literary" marketing, such as gentrification in Yorkshire. The third section, "Anthropized Landscapes: Repurposing of Sources in Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011)" analyses the most recent film adaptation of the novel, Andrea Arnold's 2011 *Wuthering Heights*, and discusses it through an eco-critical lens. This section will also expand the ideas of *Wuthering Heights* as a novel concerned with the legal, cultural, physical management and ownership of space and place, especially through the analysis of Arnold's visual vocabulary and idiosyncratic treatment of nature. Arnold, I will argue, appears to maintain a quasi-documentaristic, a-narrative streak throughout her film, while using space and nature diegetically, to convey narrative development. The fourth section, "World Moors", will take on translated theories of nature, or rather, how the "nature" cipher of *Wuthering Heights* has been employed in film and TV adaptations that either take place in countries that are not Britain, or imagine Britain from the outside. This is the case for Luis Buñuel's *Abismos de pasión* (1954), Jacques Rivette *Hurlevent* (1985), Yoshida Yoshishige's *Onimaru - Arashi Ga Oka* (1988) and two Italian TV adaptations (1956, 2004). The distinctly ecological sensibility of Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*, the geographical precision that singles out the amateur documentaries, are ideas that can get lost in translation when *Wuthering Heights* is adapted for non-British

audiences. Transnational adaptations that are not as preoccupied with exact locale as British productions are, perhaps, the only instances where landscape can truly become unleashed from localised references. Yorkshire can, therefore, become an imaginary place, or function as a general signifier, rather than a souvenir or a tracking device. It can also be substituted with geographical analogies that bear site-specific connotations, different and yet complementary to the supposed British matrix.

3.1. Archaeology of Film Nature

Haworth Parsonage has acquired a pivotal role in rooting the Brontës' legacy – it now hosts the Brontë Parsonage Museum and the Brontë Society headquarters – and its renovated premises function as the epicentre of the local tourist industry. Its position is, furthermore, crucial in locating the Brontës as members of the society they lived in: it is not, in fact, a secluded cottage, but a stately house, facing on a traffic road, and close to the town centre. As Stoneman notes in her report from nowadays touristy Haworth:

The Brontë Parsonage occupies a peculiar position in relation to the village of Haworth. When the Brontes lived there, the back of the house faced directly onto the moors, and this was the direction of most of their walks. If, however, they walked out of the front door and down the lane, a few yards would bring them to the main village 'square' and the head of the main street. (220)

Professional and occasional readers' well documented preference for the ecstatic experience of the outdoors to the mundane treatment of social issues and local history – such as those described in Charlotte's 1849 social novel *Shirley* – might have influenced which facets of the Brontë universe have come to be understood (popularly rather than critically) as the most relevant. The fact that the Brontë family was open and well-versed in the social agendas of its time has, apparently, slid in the foreground. Rusticity, secludedness, heightened states of consciousness have become the pillars of the Brontë myth, their validity extending from abstract keywords in academic papers to fully marketable hashtags. Ideas of rustic isolation, dramatic communion with unwelcoming natural habitats, lives spent enduring severe weather conditions, have,

therefore, become cultural stereotypes in mainstream and popular culture. On the one hand, they exist as independent tropes, on the other, they appear to exist as the result of continuous downsizing and recrafting over time through a series of adaptations, spin-offs, unauthorised sequels, satires and appropriations that are not exclusively literary.⁵⁷

It is hardly surprising that *Wuthering Heights* has inspired many comic and parodic variations, although its success might not be entirely due to its being at the centerpiece of western European literary canon. The dramatic tones that are usually ascribed to *Wuthering Heights* – ranging from loud domestic quarrels to ecstatic declarations of love and hate, blustery weather included – allow little space for nuance. Such clear-cut extremes, in fact, are also extremely exposed to satirical appropriation. Its bold landscape-related features, moreover, seem to be especially endowed with a certain level of iconicity. British comedy group Monty Python included a short parody of *Wuthering Heights* in “The Spanish Inquisition”, the fifteenth episode of their BBC comedy sketch show *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*. “The Semaphore Version of *Wuthering Heights*” sketch was aired on 22 September 1970, and features actors Carol Cleveland as Catherine and Terry Jones as Heathcliff, standing on top of two overlooking and ridiculously close hills, as they frantically wave red-and-yellow semaphore flags to visually shout their love for one another. The mock semaphore dialogue staged by the couple increases the comedic effect of the scene: subtitled

⁵⁷ A satirical cartoon published by *Punch* magazine on 25 December 1935, titled “Christmas Dinner at Haworth Parsonage”, sketches an imaginary, meagre and stern-looking Christmas day lunch, Reverend Brontë sharing turkey, rather than beef, with his daughters (who refuse to eat because their brother Branwell is absent). The tension at the table escalates to its comedic climax when Branwell barges in on the family’s discussion quoting a verse he claims he has written (Emily’s iconic “No coward soul is mine”), and starts quarrelling with his sister. The cartoon is republished in Patsy Stoneman’s essay “The Brontë Myth” (229). The bathetic capability that accompanies the Brontë myth has been successfully indicated in recent para-critical and humoristic commentary: a 2016 blog post by Daniel Mallory Ortberg on website *The Toast* similarly highlights the domestic drama lurking in Brontëan texts. “Every Meal In *Wuthering Heights* Ranked In Order Of Sadness” charts direct quotations from the novel – mostly dealing with insipid porridge, stale bread, cold tea and glasses of generic wine – and creates comicity by isolating the miserable living conditions that the romantic eccentricity readers are accustomed to notice, usually erases.

translation repeatedly reports cries for “Oh! Oh! Heathcliffe!” and “I love you Catherine!”, the lovers’ bodies so close to one another that their flags risk colliding. The play on outdoor spatial distance and sentimental echo chamber in *Wuthering Heights* finds its apex when Edgar Linton, played by Eric Idle, enters the scene: standing just outside a pretend Grange-like villa, he also waves semaphore flags to summon Catherine home. When she ignores his signals, however, Edgar resorts to using larger flags to scream his orders.

The hysterical love frenzy that Monty Python laughs at may find a substantial correlative in Kate Bush’ high pitched voice, crying for “Heathcliff” in the chorus of her 1977 top-chart hit debut single *Wuthering Heights*. Although Bush’ song does not display any evident parodic intention, her eerie, child-like squeals, nevertheless, could strike first-time listeners as ludicrously outlandish, while her approach to the source text could be viewed as immature and impressionistic at best. Certainly, Bush’ music is remarkably composite and imaginative, and *Wuthering Heights* is deservedly remembered as one of her greatest creations, still, its vocal oddity combined with the stiff dance moves Bush stretches in its complementary videoclips⁵⁸ seems to hint at the same manic, bathetic sentimentality that also inspired Monty Python. Nevertheless, Nicky Losseff recognises remarkable musical merit in Bush’ debut: the images of “home” and “window”, along with a vocabulary relating to otherworldly life and ghostlike presence are not only part of the lyrics, but concepts – adapted directly from the novel source – that Bush explores through the tonal range and harmonic structure of her song (236). Losseff suggests that Bush’ treatment of her source is reminiscent of an opera librettist’s synthetic approach:

⁵⁸ Notoriously, there are two available video clips for *Wuthering Heights*, which Bush fans refer to as “the red dress” and the “white dress” versions. In Christina Andreef 1999 film *Soft Fruit* – in which Jane Campion participated as producer – one of the four sister protagonists, Nadia (played by Sacha Horler) mimes Kate Bush’s “red dress” choreography as she lip-syncs to the song in the aftermath of her mother’s passing. The scene channels Nadia’s feelings of grief into a received performance of unabashed liberation from claustrophobic environments – either a suburban Australian family house or a desolate farmhouse on the Yorkshire moors – whose main mode of action is through one’s body. The dance and the banshee-like screaming all participate in signifying the coming together of affirmative singularity and assertive detachment from the material situations each of the related characters – Nadia, Catherine Earnshaw, possibly Kate Bush herself – come to experience.

the peak of a character's dramatic feelings, their emotional journey, is encapsulated in the aria, whereas narrative motion is relegated to recitatives. Bush' pop format, however, renounces context and focuses on setting the atmosphere. As Bush explained in a 1978 interview, the creative challenge she set for herself was conveying the mood of the entire book in her short lyrics (qtd. In Losseff 228). Bush' interest in plot or narrative development is minimal, yet addressed in her simultaneous employment of present and past tenses (Losseff 228): the opening stanza's past historic "Out on the wiley, windy moors / We'd roll and fall in green" introduces a neat distinction between a narrative present and a gone, shared past between the, yet unnamed, characters making up the "we". A twist in the plural union of the characters – "How could you leave me / When I needed to possess you? / I hated you, I loved you, too" – builds the narrative path, along with the tension, towards the chorus. Listeners unaware of the title of the song – as many radio-listeners would be in 1978 – would have to wait for the "Heathcliff" reference in the chorus to understand the reference to Brontë's novel (provided they had good enough bookish literacy). However, Bush' voice is the real hook, her delicate, yet powerful grain is "at the juncture of language and pure sound" (Losseff 229), its quality has been described by music critics as alike "a newly-neutered cat", "either Minnie Mouse or Heavenly Host", and bearing an "oriental sound", as Losseff quotes in her essay (229). Bush' voice control might convey ideas about child and adult sexuality, however, her skillful mastery of tonal range serves, according to Losseff, as an exploratory tool for Cathy's spiritual state, as well as a direct signifier (through the wailing pitch Bush performs) of her being a ghost who is still tied to the world of the living (230). Bush casts the window as the only stable physical barrier between her characters, a fundamental detail that she adapted directly from the (undefined) *Wuthering Heights* TV adaptation that, allegedly, inspired her songwriting. On the occasion of Emily Brontë's birth bicentenary, in 2018, and forty years after the release of the *Wuthering Heights* single, Kate Bush was commissioned by the Bradford Literature Festival to write a tribute to the writer. Bush joined poets Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay, and novelist Jeannette Winterson in writing poems dedicated to each sister and their collective legacy which would be engraved in stones. The Festival's director Syima Aslam was quoted by interviewer Mark Brown in *The Guardian*, in april 2018, as

saying: “Charlotte stone will be at the house where the Brontës [...] were born in the village of Thornton. Anne’s stone will be in a meadow beside the parsonage in Haworth, now the Brontë Parsonage Museum, where the family grew up. The Emily and Brontë legacy stones will be in the landscape”. It is telling that Emily’s persona and legacy is reified into a material signposts that is planned to be placed into such an undefined geo-location: “Putting the Emily stone on the wild and exposed moors [...]” continues the article, as if it were certain that the reference to the novel’s bleak reputation would not be lost on readers. Moreover, Kate Bush’ poem confirms, rather than update or challenge, her younger self’s interpretation of Brontë: “She stands outside / A book in her hands / ‘Her name is Cathy’, she says [...]”⁵⁹ the first three verses go. Bush seems to reiterate the anthropizing conceit that places a house within a natural landscape, functioning as the symbol and nexus of the human bonds occurring through and around it. She, perhaps, willfully references her own song, especially when naming specific human-made barriers, such as doors and windows, that are crucial in the classic understanding of the love-sick relationship between separated lovers Catherine and Heathcliff. Reading the final verse “Ah Emily. Come in, come in and stay” engraved on a stone perched in an open, natural “landscape” – presumably devoid of constructions in its vicinity – could, at worst result jarring, at best offer a commentary on the inside/outside dichotomy that seems so central to the dynamics of Brontë’s novel. All commissioned writers seem to display a somewhat conventional treatment of the idiosyncratic psycho-geography of the Brontës: Kay mentions the “moor’s winds”, Duffy invites Charlotte to take her heart and “fling it as a hawk over the moors, flaysome”. Winterson’s poem *Brontesaurus*, on the other hand, is the only one to attempt a core drill of the layers that cinch the Brontë, rather than sketch a panorama. The verses “Fossil record of a miracle / Bone by Bone / Word for Word” open the poem, acknowledging the embodied presence of the sisters in a specific place, without fetishising either their lives and the space they inhabited: the overall effect suggests an invitation to let go of vestiges and invites a focus on the transmissible, measurable

⁵⁹ The poems commissioned to Duffy, Kay, Winterson and Bush are all quoted in full in Vanessa Thorpe’s *Guardian* article.

inheritance they left behind. Brontëan landscape, Winterson seems to hint, is little more than a handful of lines in the chapters the sisters penned a couple centuries ago.

The notion of a harsh natural realm, which percolated in the cultural legacy of *Wuthering Heights*, has, however, seldom been challenged or assuaged. The moors, the winds, being a raven rather than a dove,⁶⁰ are all crucial to the *Wuthering Heights* brand identity. Cinema and TV, especially, have picked up on the visual components of the natural protagonist in *Wuthering Heights*, and structured its canonical appearance: a believable *Wuthering Heights* setting should feature wind-swept heather fields, bone-soaking rain, muddy trails, rough woods and hard-edged rocks. Landscape is often used – especially in commercial productions aimed at a general audience – as a metaphor and/or a visual signifier of the protagonist's tormented inner states. Heritage-minded films, however, have in turn paid consistent attention to the specificity of local detail, and purposefully framed the landscape as a British hallmark. Even when *Wuthering Heights* has been adapted⁶⁰ in countries other than the UK, the focus on its wilderness has been maintained, and dutifully translated to fit different, site-specific notions of “open nature”. Following the “nature” track in film and TV productions spanning almost a century – from Bramble’s lost 1920 silent adaptation to the most recent one, Andrea Arnold’s 2011 *Wuthering Heights* – allows interesting viewpoints on several issues concerning the making of film history, and especially about shifting ideas of what nature is, how it differs from, or becomes entrenched with the concept of environment, in what ways human animals avert or relate to it.

The increasing awareness of climate change, recently turned into full-fledged climate emergency, has resulted into the burgeoning of transdisciplinary specialties and ecological-conscious critical frameworks within the humanities that are specifically concerned with tracing and assessing the evolution and cultural understanding of human notions of nature, along with human reactions to cohabitation with non-human

⁶⁰ Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 prefatory note to *Selections from poems by Ellis Bell* describes the general character of her sister Emily and sketches the barren look of the landscape that inspired her work:

Mills and scattered cottages chase romance from these valleys; it is only higher up, deep in amongst the ridges of the moors, that Imagination can find rest for the sole of her foot: and even if she finds it there, she must be a solitude-loving raven—no gentle dove. (Jack et al. 301)

species. Ecocriticism⁶¹ has developed, among others, a specific approach to think about film and nature in conjunction, whether film is used as a medium to explore and showcase natural, non-human environments, or as a didactic and/or rhetorical tool to educate audiences on wildlife in the open: a useful alarm-inducing (rather than aesthetically soothing) method to raise awareness about climate emergency. In its materialist turn, ecocriticism has proven able to discuss film as ecosystem, not only metaphorically, but literally, as a physical object whose production and distribution is deeply imbricated in the environmental net. The existence and reproduction of cultural systems relies on material infrastructures that impact real-life resources (e.g. the high-level environmental footprint caused by film shooting, the material histories of exploitation embedded in the resources that make celluloid film and professional equipment) in ways that have little to do with the paths of meaning that cinema, for instance, contributes to create and spread virtually. By focusing on the non-human object captured on film as autonomous signifier – rather than construe it as a metaphorical or allegorical cipher whose scope is limited to the individual motion feature, and is, inevitably, human-centred in its development – ecocritics search for sideways approaches to watch and look at film.

In her essay *The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter*, Jane Bennett discusses her fascination with liminal philosophical spaces: ideas that embrace the non-human and its power in strictly material terms. Bennett does not disavow the necessary paradox, or rather, continuity, between the human body doing the thinking

⁶¹ Ecocritical thought is by no means a novelty brought on by the last decade of steady media coverage concerned with rising sea-levels and inextinguishable wildfires: research concerned with the history of the ideas about the environment has been a staple in Anglophone academia since the postwar years. Ecocritical output is too vast to be fully acknowledged here, I shall however mention that texts that have been instrumental in my thinking. Besides canonical works such as Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* and Leo Marx' *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, I have relied on more recent overviews such as Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought*, the anthology edited by Caterina Salabè *Ecocritica. La letteratura e la crisi del pianeta*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, edited by Louise Westling. Kate Soper's essays on human active responsibility towards the preservation and organization of natural environments became, however, my main point of reference, especially "Looking at Landscape" (2001), "Humans, Animals, Machines" (2001), "Representing Nature." (1998) and "The Goodness of Nature and the Nature of Goodness" (2000).

and the material object frames as its subject: her attempt is to address a “*less specifically human* kind of materiality” (348), so as to assess the quality of human attention concerning such matters, and test “the thingness of things” (349) in order to verify one’s personal feelings towards it. Detracting, shifting the focus from human-centered topics and buzzwords could, and should, according to Bennett, help individuals develop a keener sense of proximity and concern for non-human subjectivities, and a deeper consideration of items whose existence sees no overlaps with human matters.⁶² What I find most notable is Bennett’s notion – which informs my own argument – that the study of the effects the materiality of things has on humans is, albeit important, secondary to the primary act of paying attention to entities whose modes of existence fall outside manmade theorization. The continuity that ties varying forms of power together is the ontological fundamental that Bennett summons in order to ground her ecological thinking: awareness needs to be attuned to an “extended sense” (354) that perceives all things as enmeshed with one another. Human exceptionalism is understood, in Bennett’s discussion, as “recklessness” (354), especially when it actualises itself into (nefarious) behaviour and practices, and a mere act of solipsism when it is oblivious of material spatial dynamics. Nevertheless, the mediation that acts as an undeniable filter – after all, the rationalisation of so-called “natural” items links back to human cultural paradigms⁶³ – may be of hindrance to the shedding of the self (under whichever name it presents itself: will, autonomy or

⁶² Bennett draws from various thinkers, for instance, she quotes H.D. Thoreau’s definition of “wild” as the “existence peculiar to a thing that is irreducible to the thing’s imbrication with human subjectivity” (348), a position that she links directly to Foucault’s “otherness” (348). Bennett is equally interested in organic as well as organic forms of non-human, the latter being instrumental to ideas about self-organization and mobility of non-human objects that bestow power (“thing-power” is her definition, 348) upon their surrounding environment. Bennett therefore ascribes to Latour’s notion that agency pertains to every object, and qualifies as such whenever an item acts and/or alters the environment they inhabit, regardless of any thought-motion accompanying their gesture (355).

⁶³ Bennet stresses the gap between the object and thinking about the object: “The materialisms of Lucretius, Deleuze, and Negri are impertinent dare to speak of things as if from the perspective of the (cheeky) themselves” (359). She is all too aware of the conceptual barrier that reduces the “thing-power” to yet another entry of philosophical jargon.

consciousness, 359) that Bennet supports. For instance, the repeated employment of negative language in order to describe “non-humanness” by denying humanness covers up a conceptual failure with an inaccurate statement of non-identity. The framing of dynamism, flow, mutuality as the foundational characteristics of the environments inhabited by organic and inorganic entities is also apparent in Bennett’s definition of ecology as “the study or story of the place where we live, or better the place that we live” (365).

The restoration of materiality as a primary site of speculation and confrontation should lead, Bennett hopes, towards relationships between human and non-human agents that are better informed, more conscious and, hopefully, greater than unidirectional patterns of consumption. The “deliberateness” and “intentionality” (365) wished for by Bennett play an influential role also in cases where the “non-human thing” bears the status of descriptive fiction, when it exists as a simulacrum of the real, as organic objects mimicked on the page or on the screen. The development of an ecology of exegesis could similarly insist on observing the deliberate exploitation of natural tropes as cultural and narrative signifiers, describing how the aesthetics of literary woods reacts to its ethical underpinnings, understanding how narrative structures conventionally feed on natural resources to build meaning, while seldom offering them centre-stage.

As Adam O’Brien points out, to dismiss the allegory and the metaphor as principal methods of interpretation or inquiry, allows the (depicted) natural objects to become central in the critical discussion as material items (260). “Mimetic analysis as an environmental ethic” (260) is the direction O’Brien suggests for thinking about film and nature in conjunction. Nature on film is not merely an indicator of the taste and representational conventions in a set epoch (and place), it can also be the bearer of specific political commentary on the relationship between human communities and local material resources. In the introductory pages of his “field guide” to the American independent and experimental film scene, *The Machine in the Garden*, Scott MacDonald posits that landscape is a crucial feature in all visual arts, including cinema, and that the representation of “rural and rural scenes is virtually indispensable to film pleasure” (3). MacDonald’s argument is intimately tied to the history of pictorial image-making in America, and he argues that, whereas the genre has lost the central

role it had in nineteenth century cultural debates, images of open spaces are everywhere. Landscape is a feature that experimental and commercial works both have in common. Their engagement with the natural object/idea, however, differs. For instance, a critical approach to (American) open lands and nature is, allegedly, possible only outside of commercial film circuits (MacDonald 4). While landscape is, by logic, background scenery in mainstream films, the interest in natural subjects can supersede narrative and character focus in works that do not cater to the audience's entertainment. Fixed-camera gaze on "bland" objects such as horizon lines, early morning fog, or mountainous profiles, can come across as particularly boring or difficult to an untrained viewer (MacDonald 7). The choice of "simple subjects", MacDonald notes, is also evocative of pioneer cinema short clips (6): the Cinématographe silent mini-films that would concentrate their appeal in showing the new medium's stretchy capabilities as a recording and time-warping instrument, rather than as a tool for narrative make-believe. As primitive techniques soon became obsolete, and their monothematic structures were gradually substituted by full-fledged story-telling, landscape became a feature of set-design rather than a focal point in the script. The ensuing discussion will attempt to understand in what ways the long line of *Wuthering Heights* adaptations has contributed to the formation of analogous "environmental ethics".

The conspicuous wildlife streak of filmic *Wuthering Heights* might have retroactively influenced the understanding of Emily Brontë's novel, but different conceptions of the non-human and the non-urban, as rendered in man-made film media, have also contributed to evoke original significance. Specific stances are promoted along with certain portrayals of natural landscapes, a range that includes, but is not limited to, attentive care to biological processes, training in aesthetic appreciation, promotion or criticism of anthropocentric discourses. A fascination with natural landscapes easily shifts from source texts to early film adaptation in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, or at least it survives in surrounding discourse about the work. I am deeply indebted to Valérie Hazette's and María Seijo-Richart's archival ("archaeological" as Seijo-Richart describes it) research of one of the earliest known *Wuthering Heights* adaptations,

Albert V. Bramble's silent 1920 feature *Wuthering Heights*.⁶⁴ Footage is lost,⁶⁵ but a handful of stills, a film programme issued by Ideal, its production company, and a few trade magazine reviews allow partial assessment of the film. Bramble's *Wuthering Heights* was supposedly thought out as a considerable feat of filmmaking: its nine reels, against the customary five of its epoch, would stretch its running time from around ninety minutes onwards. The extended duration would allow plenty of space for more than one performer to interpret Cathy and Heathcliff at different ages and, moreover, to also include the second generation's story (which later film adaptations would tend to elide).

Moreover, Bramble's *Wuthering Heights* was conceived and marketed as a "prestige production". Its debt to the novel source rather than theatrical performances, Hazette notes, were repeatedly remarked upon in para-cinematic grey materials (76, 93). In a

⁶⁴ Hazette devotes a whole chapter to A.V. Bramble's film career in *Wuthering Heights on Film and Television* (2015). She portrays Bramble as an efficient and respected figure in the profession, an admirer of American film technique, which he sought to reproduce in his British context. Hazette also places *Wuthering Heights*'s screewriter Eliot Stannard on early cinema history map, by coupling his name with Alfred Hitchcock's and discussing their partnership on the set of 1929 film *The Manxman* (145-56). Seijo-Richart pursues her research with the analysis of *Wuthering Heights* original script by Eliot Stannard, which was acquired by the Brontë Parsonage Library in January 2015. Her results describe an adaptation that was extremely faithful to its original source, an original work despite its attempts to mitigate the protagonists' characters and conflict (256).

⁶⁵ Hazette speculates two possible reasons for the disappearance of all copies as well as the master negative of Bramble's *Wuthering Heights*. First, the silver nitrate emulsion used for both negatives and prints of silent movies made the film highly flammable (temperatures over four degrees celsius would cause the material to auto combust) and, therefore, extremely fragile. Moreover, silver nitrate film from the early 1900s may also have been recycled for its material value, its content probably considered unworthy of copying onto 35-mm film. Second, careless or inadequate management of the Ideal archive after the company was purchased by Gaumont-British in 1927 may have caused the perishing, or disappearance, of the film (Hazette 118). Seijo-Richart seems to agree, in her doctoral thesis she suggests that the study of silent-era films is rendered extremely difficult due to the loss of most original reels and copies. The materials employed were very fragile and projection or duplication could, at times, suffice to destroy them (248).

historical moment that was yet to construe and accept cinema as an independent art form, claiming a close-resemblance between cinema screen and canonical novels would negotiate the film's value for both popular and more respectable, upmarket audiences (Hazette 76-7). This is in keeping with Hilary Radner's argument, in her chapter on film as popular culture in *The Routledge Companion to Film History*: the focus on storytelling and narrative in the early stage of the development of cinema as an industry⁶⁶ was grounded in its "closest ancestors" (17), nineteenth century novel and theatre fictions.⁶⁷ As the film business borrowed familiar stories and themes from more established cultural forms in order to make its products understandable and purchasable, it eventually managed to craft its own language and, crucially, its own meaning as a shared cultural experience. While the notion of "cinema" expanded from simple curiosity to low-level entertainment for working-class people, the growth in interest, capital and creative production allowed the industry to grasp the attention of wealthier and more cultured targets, such as middle-class audiences (Radner 19).

Hazette grounds her discussion in the scant available material, the film stills reproduced in the audience programme drafted by Ideal (see fig. 13). "If the melodrama of the acting is apparent in the stills featuring Heathcliff and Hindley, the novelty springs from the freshness of the outdoor scene with Edgar and Cathy, and the realisation that the movie was shot using some superb locations" (Hazette 76). For her archaeological reconstruction of Bramble's 1920 *Wuthering Heights*, Seijo-Richart analyses surviving newspaper clippings offering reviews or local chronicle during film-shooting, and notes the widespread tendency to write about the "real setting" of the production – for instance

⁶⁶ Radner makes a clear, opposing distinction between the forking paths of early cinema: as an art form, and as popular entertainment. She also notes further levels in "popular cinema", which can either mean a kind of filmmaking made by ordinary people, and the industrial productions made for the entertainment of the people, for a profit (16-18). The overlapping of the entertainment and culture industries registered by early cinema scholars and thinkers such as the Frankfurt School group, moreover, signals cinema's powerful (and potentially dangerous) capabilities as an ideological vehicle (17).

⁶⁷ Radner also makes a positive hypothesis as to whether the borrowing of narrative structures, as well as fictional content, might account for "the significant tradition of adaptation that characterizes cinematic narrative" (17).

regretting that sites like Top Withens and Ponden Hall were reduced to ruins, hence unsuitable as locations (251).

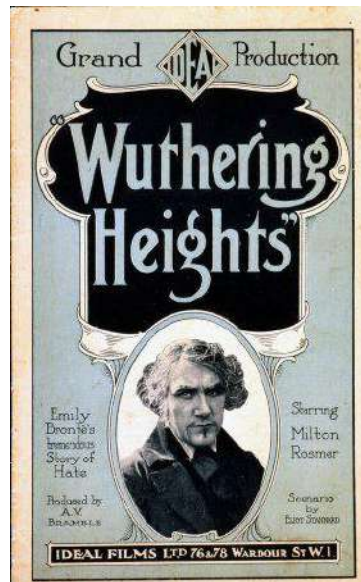


Fig. 13. Poster for the film *Wuthering Heights* (1920), directed by A.V. Bramble.

Ideal's programme, moreover, only provides information about the brick-and-mortar locations of the film:

The present picture was taken by Mr. Bramble, the producer, in the locale in which the story is laid and although *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*, the two houses in and around which the action passes, are in ruins, the Old Hall, Haworth, the home of the Emmott family and a grand old building of the Tudor period, was kindly placed at the disposal of Ideal Films for the representation of the former, while for *Thrushcross Grange*, *Kildwick Hall* the beautiful Elizabethan residence of Mr. W.A. Briggs, was fortunately secured. (Ideal's Programme, foreword qtd. in Hazette, figure 6, 83)

It is related publicity material, nevertheless, that provides information about the undocumented natural background. On Wednesday, 5 May 1920, *The Yorkshire Observer* dedicated an article to the shooting of Bramble's *Wuthering Heights*, titled "*Wuthering Heights* in a Film Version – Mummings on the Moors – The Difficulties of

Cinema Play Production” (qtd. in Hazette 129). Two “on-location photographs” accompanied the piece (see fig. 14). One portrays the backs of A.V. Bramble, his assistant Miss Murray, his cinematographer Claude McDonnell (perched on top of a wooden chair as he is operating his camera) surveilling the scene. A couple technicians prop the white-lined panels towards the actors, who are playing, Hazette claims, a scene that is “non-existent in the book, where Cathy is rescued by Edgar: she has been rambling the moors with a boyish Heathcliff, and sprained her ankle” (129). The second photograph portrays Bramble, knee-deep in stream water at “Brontë Waterfalls”, showily carrying a tripod. There is a bold and adventurous quality to Bramble’s staunch pose, his legs firmly grounded in the riverbed as he supervises his troupe’s (and equipment) safe fording to the opposite bank. These photos seem to hinge on the idea of a “difficult” natural environment, a space whose poetic overtones turn out to be impractical, often dangerous nuisances for everyone involved. They also, however, feed into the narrative of enchantment that casts Cathy, Heathcliff – as well as the author herself – as solitary figures who are uniquely capable of drawing spiritual nourishment from exposure to feral realms.



Fig. 14. *Left, shooting a scene on location; right, A.V. Bramble and his troupe fording a stream.*

While Bramble’s pioneering film adaptation understood locale within a transactional relationship, one that would shape existing locations into meaningful, albeit not

accurate, landscapes, other film enterprises have adopted differing, and possibly opposite approaches to the natural narratives of *Wuthering Heights* and its paratextual companions. For instance, an amateur endeavour such as Jack Eley's⁶⁸ 1980 documentary *Jane Emily* testifies to the geo-local and heritage concerns combined into the mythopoeic aspects of *Wuthering Heights*' legacy. *Emily Jane* is not so much a biographical portrait of Emily Brontë than a map of the places she spent her life in: Eley tracks down each surviving parsonage and educational institution Brontë lived or worked in, lingering on commemorative plaques and discussing their original function and screening its current condition. For instance, he shows how Cowan Bridge Clergy Daughters' School in Lancashire, the boarding school where the Brontë sisters were sent after the death of their mother, has now been divided into three private cottages. Eley's inability, or unwillingness, to distinguish between the writer and her novel⁶⁹ is hardly surprising, yet *Emily Jane*'s historical ingenuousness is somehow redeemed by the documentary value of its shots. While Eley dutifully pays visits to the major Brontë highlights and mausoleums, at the heart of *Emily Jane* are the fixed-camera shots of the landscape: massive rocks, windswept grass fields, narrow trails, weak creeks and short waterfalls make up postcard-like images that reinforce the prototype demure wilderness of Brontëland (see fig. 15).

The poetic character that Eley derivatively ascribed to the Yorkshire moor is reversed, through a sort of comic relief, in Eley's friend and collaborator Gordon Riley's "behind the scene" documentary *The Shooting of Emily Jane* (1980). Riley follows the small cast

⁶⁸ Eley was an active member of the Leeds Cine Club who made short movies for a period spanning from the 1930s up to the early 1980s. Eley was a resourceful and accomplished amateur filmmaker who managed to secure financial and logistical support from the Brontë Society and the Yorkshire Arts Association to film his narrative documentary.

⁶⁹ The figure of Emily Brontë is simultaneously revered – therefore dutifully researched through archive documents and scholarly work – and downsized by means of infantilising devices. Brontë's anonymous authorship is once again reinstated with the elision of her surname and the recovery of her middle name, Jane: the resulting label, the endearing "Emily Jane" succeeds in appeasing the disquiet and discomfort the land Brontë knew and lived in allegedly suggest.

and production team working at *Emily Jane*, their uphill hikes dragging heavy film equipment and home-made costumes. A female voice-over helps understand the troupe's actions and their director's work patterns. The women impersonating the Brontës – among them Eley's wife Gladys and daughter Sue – endure weather hardships on top of tourists' curious gaze as they change into their period-feel petticoats in the middle of the heathland. They are later recorded having a hard time protecting their packed lunches from the feral cats that try to snatch a bite from their sandwiches during shooting breaks. Nature bears no awe-inspiring features in Riley's documentary counterpoint: it is either a nuisance or an asset for the local tourist industry, its inhospitable nature has been dutifully harnessed with direction signs, the anonymity of its large scale reduced into sightseeing localities (Top Withens, Brontë waterfall, etc). While Emily Jane sits gracefully on a rock, gazing dreamily into the distance, the uncredited actress playing her role tries her best to save her underskirt's rim from the mud (see fig. 16). Nevertheless, the quaint ideal of the moors developed in *Emily Jane*, is not undermined by *The Shooting of Emily Jane*, whose attention towards the menial and tiring side of working on location is in keeping with the overarching tendency to live one's experience of the moor "as if" it were analogous with, if not identical to the Brontë's. The mixing of fictional and authorial levels of reality is, arguably, the form of vicarious pleasure that is easiest to attain, not only when watching the film itself, but especially when consuming para-cinematic explanatory material. Embodying the outdoor experience may require a lesser leap of cognitive ideation if a flesh-and-blood individual is believed to be voicing it, rather than fictional, opaque beings. On screen, the sublime mode of appreciation that is a defining feature of the *Wuthering Heights* narrative-cum-brand can be experienced visually, at times haptically, by viewers enjoying a safe and dry mediated encounter with the wild.



Fig. 15. Shots from Eley's *Emily Jane*. Clockwise: the fictional Brontë siblings run on the moor; a fictional Emily Brontë sits alone on a rock; landscape shoots of the wild Yorkshire outdoors.



Fig. 16. Shots from Riley's *The Shooting of Emily Jane*. Clockwise: child actors change into their costumes shielded by car doors; an actress hides her lunch from a feral cat during a shooting break on location!; an actress fixes her bonnet using a car window as a mirror.

Objects such as *The Shooting of Emily Jane* and the backstage picture of the 1920 set, on the other hand, demystify “savage” streak of the Brontëan landscape by exposing, somewhat ironically, the human infrastructure that persistently tames the dangers and assuages the discomforts of being “out”. These “secondary” sources, in virtue of their documentary scope, suggest that there can be no understanding of the environment that is not anthropocentric in its structure and processes. That human presence in the open air can be a comic, ludicrous experience, is an interesting side effect. Most importantly, its physical incursion has visible, lasting consequences on the environment it seeks to record: footprints, tire trails, sandwich wrappings, human voice and noise add little to the charm of the place, but surely take much away from the balance of its wildlife. Multimedia adaptations across film, documentary, song, illustration, and comic performance can function as magnifying lenses on the specifics of their master source(s): a specific framework can help connect a single theme weaved through different works to each work’s contextual relevance and concerns. In the case of the natural theme in *Wuthering Heights*, certain ecocritical stances can contribute to evaluate the significance of space, locale and non-human life in a single narrative, be it fictional, documentary or ancillary to other discourses. Nevertheless, an assessment of the primogenial treatment of such topics by the novelistic matrix, is paramount. I do not, however, seek a hierarchical positioning between source and adaptation, rather, in the following section I will attempt to retrace the value and quality of natural items in Emily Brontë’s 1948 novel *Wuthering Heights*.

3.2. Paper Nature: “Hewn in a Wild Workshop”

Nancy Armstrong’s chapter on the Brontë sisters in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a Political History of the Novel*, opens with a personal anecdote: the taxi-driver who took her to the university of Leeds, where she was to attend the 1981 Brontë conference, stated that “the death of Emily Brontë” was, according to him, the most important event of 1848 (186). Offered as a commentary on the pervasive popularity of the Brontë even among Leodensian service workers, the notion of the Brontë as firmly embedded in a historical as well as cultural consciousness prompts Armstrong’s argument that their novels need be read against customary “psychologizing tropes” (187). The socialization

of desire that the sisters attempted, Armstrong argues, appears to work in contrasting reaction to traditional techniques of sentimental description. Desire, for Brontë characters, does not aim to, or is even resolved in social respectability, on the contrary, it is a displaced psychological experience that eludes institutional labelling (192-3). The novel form, as the Brontës understand it and make use of, works as a mediator, a way for readers to explore the unbridgeable discrepancy between inner life and the cultivation of personal desire, from legitimate, authoritative patterns of family and community building (188-9). Their ingenious tactic, Armstrong argues, is to craft a parallel past that bears resemblance to factual history, which is, however, reduced to a scenery, rather than an active system influencing characters' lives: "these tropes translated all kinds of political information into psychological terms" (187). Armstrong laments the tendency to perceive the Brontë in a historical vacuum, to read *Wuthering Heights* as "a self-enclosed text with a curiously private system of meaning" (202): their depiction of forms of consciousness that may strike the reader as remarkably modern should not overshadow the factual schemes that governed and defined individual's social roles at the time when the Brontë were alive and working.

The first posthumous edition of *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1950 as a volume that also contained Anne's *Agnes Grey*, included a new, explanatory preface by Charlotte. While the rumours about Ellis, Currer and Bell's real gender are confirmed, Charlotte mainly attempts to assuage the reputation of *Wuthering Heights* as a savage novel by stressing its similarities with the place its author knew and lived in, therefore shifting the responsibility from the writer to her environment. In her 1850 editor's preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë notoriously describes the novel as "[...] rustic all through. It is moorish, and wild, and knotty as a root of health. Nor was it natural that it should be otherwise; the author being herself a native and nursling of the moors" (Brontë xlvii). Her marketing strategy is based on a sort of semantic interchangeability among text, author and the moors. The outdoor space thus became a cornerstone of virtually any discussion of the novel as well as of its author's biography. Charlotte's preface ends thus: "*Wuthering Heights* was hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials" (Brontë I). Not only is Charlotte positing her sister as a mere vehicle for grander inspiration rather than an independent creative propeller, she

substitutes the textual and conceptual components of the novel with material counterparts, as rough and raw as could be found in a Yorkshire backyard: stones, moss, heath, all in tones of “mellow grey” (Brontë I) and ready to be chiselled by human hand. This section will attempt to follow the track of the Brontë “wild workshop”, in the hope to materialise the metaphor so as to understand the un-narrative historical links on the background of the novel, the contextual forces that bind its characters more firmly, perhaps, than the complex pushes of desire and sentimental distress it openly addresses. Emily Brontë seems to have infused the non-human dimension, the material setting, the unsentimental communication (such as legal jargon), the subdued description of land-ownership (and land-grabbing) with as much depth as she provided bound-breaking portrayals of un-social, disreputable behaviours.

Barrister and economics scholar C.P. Sanger traced the overarching chronology and examined the legalities sustaining the plot of *Wuthering Heights* in a 1926 essay for the Hogarth Press. “The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*”⁷⁰ hypothesised as to the overlapping of narrative development and bureaucratic truthfulness that Brontë set up in order to allow Heathcliff – a “human cuckoo” as Sanger dubs him – to gain possession of both estates, the Heights and Thrushcross Grange, by the end of the novel. Sanger is impressed, yet unsurprised by the botanic and topographical precision on display since “Emily Brontë loved the country”. He is, however, at a loss when it comes to contextualising Brontë’s legal proficiency. What he can provide, however, is a neat comparison between the history of British real and personal property law, and the legal travails that define the whole novel, but are particularly visible in its latter half. Sanger’s technical points, however, pertain mainly to the “real estate” components of the inheritable assets featured in the novel: the brick-and-mortar Heights farm, and the grander, warmer Thrushcross Grange. Sanger demonstrates how Heathcliff first achieves possession of the Heights as mortgagee, and later comes to own the Grange – albeit improperly – as heir to his son Linton. After Heathcliff’s death, newlyweds Catherine and Hareton might risk losing any right to inhabit either properties:

⁷⁰ C.P. Sanger’s essay “The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*” was later anthologised in *Wuthering Heights: An Anthology of Criticism* edited by Alastair Everitt (1967). Given the rarity of the published source, all quotations from Sanger refer to the digitized online version of the essay.

What then becomes of Hareton and Catherine who, when the tale ends, are to be happily married on New Year's Day, 1803? At one time I thought this was the climax of the tragedy. These young people, ill-educated and incompetent, were to be left destitute. (Sanger)

Sanger speculates, through the dutiful application of the inheritance jurisprudence then available, that Hareton and Catherine could each claim ownership to, respectively the Heights and the Grange, hereby reconciling the novel-long conflict. Hence, marriage is reinforced by property law, and together with a reinstated freehold they signal the return (or introduction) of a state of balance. Legal minutia, however, does not seem to explicitly encompass the “undeveloped” side of the real estate under litigation: the barren and/or cultivated land pertaining to the houses and their major source of income. It is rather unsurprising that cinematic adaptation later chose to make do without explicit references to the mundane tasks that sustain their protagonists’ dramatic plotline. Narrative melodrama and emotional response can undoubtedly be better achieved by sidelining mundane maintenance tasks.⁷¹

Barbara Munson Goff, in her 1984 essay “Between Natural Theology and Natural Selection: Breeding the Human Animal in *Wuthering Heights*” reads the peculiar character of the novel – a novel that seems a-romantic rather than anti-romantic, in the sentimental, not the literary sense of the term – as a “botanical experiment” (486), the transplantation at its core being responsible for its edginess:

Wuthering Heights is, instead, a kind of botanical experiment, the grafting of a bourgeois romance of marriage and property onto a gothic romance of love and death. It is the grafting that attracts those of us who read the novel theoretically, trying to discover what it is really about. (Munson Goff 486)

Munson Goff laments filmmakers’ tendency to favour the latter streak and allow the former to pass unnoticed, or as a given. As is customary, the human plot is the one that

⁷¹ The following chapter section on Andrea Arnolds’ 2011 adaptation will develop this argument further.

tends to be given prominence, not just in film adaptations, but also in literary exegesis: at first glance the “botanical” aspect that Munson Guff points out can, therefore, appear as a simple structural facet, a contextual feature. It could, however, also bear wider, deeper resonances. To understand the human individual as fully, and inextricably, imbricated with the land they live on means, first and foremost, to take into account relationships between the human and the non-human that may have little in common with the visionary commonplace, the unilateral mysticism of a standardised “nature” mindset. As Ian Ward argues, “the narrative jurisprudence described in *Wuthering Heights* gauges the marginal presence and absence of law” (50): the outwardly “wild” and “rough” lifestyle at the Heights, the simmering state of violence its inhabitants experience appears as the consequence of a lack of judicial control, whereas it also results from the predatory use and manipulation of those very legal apparatus. Stanger read the novel tragic climax in Heathcliff’s testament⁷² (or lack thereof), but was also able to find an appeasing hypothesis to its conclusion through his legal knowledge: a somewhat comfortable ending, if not a happy one, in which British jurisprudence finds a way to reinstate the land’s legitimate heirs as its official owners, despite the bureaucratic turmoil brought on by the usurping outsider. Heathcliff’s aptitude to navigate the law and turn it to its favour, however, demonstrates the much chilling notion that juridical devices granting land control are stretchier and stronger than uncodified norms regulating personal relationships within the domestic realm. Lack of adequate legislation, combined with cultural unawareness, fosters the crudest display of power. It is unclear, in *Wuthering Heights*, whether families are dysfunctional because of insufficient legal systems or, indeed, *because* of highly specific jurisprudence that empowers some individuals at the expense of those it polices and/or excludes. Ward notes how Heathcliff’s consistent resort to violence (as menace or as action) casts the whole human net in a state of perpetual victimhood:

⁷² After his death, Heathcliff combined estate will escheat to the Crown. The novel does not provide further evidence of the heir’s claims after their marriage; scholars like Ward and Sanger speculate that Hareton might be able to exercise his equitable right of redemption over the Heights, while Catherine could receive a stable income through the life interest she inherited over the Grange.

Children are regularly abused. So are servants. Nelly is imprisoned at the Heights for five days, in case her return to Thrushcross Grange might jeopardise the prospective nuptials of Linton and Catherine. There is a sorry inevitability about the serial abuse of wives. The law might have sought to limit rights of chastisement, but there is nothing, in practice, that can save Isabella from being assaulted by her husband. (Ward 57)

Just like marriage contracts are employed as vengeance schemes or death-like sentences, the legal ties that Brontë inserts as fully functional plot propellers bring the outdoors to the fireplace. While, on the foreground, nuptials disrupt relationships that had existed on a horizontal level of equality (and *de facto* ordering them vertically, so as to enhance the genealogical tree's authority), on the middle to background the Earnshaws and Lintons' inheritable wealth grows sustained by human and animal work, an invisible process achieved through forms of structural exploitation of the available natural resources. "Land" is the fundamental underpinning: as earth to be owned, as dirt to be cultivated, as mud to be dug, each of the human-centered "botanical" narratives in the novel clearly, and necessarily, stem from it. Ward's analysis is particularly centered on the legal and social situations of bastard offspring, the connection between illegitimacy and adultery and, consequently, their joint effects on "property and propriety" (52). The othering of Heathcliff – the foundling orphan who may or may not be Mr Earnshaw's illegitimate son – is, in Ward's reading, paramount to its characterization. The fact that he is denied the same patronymic as the other children, is rejected as a suitable partner for, supposedly, reasons of reputation and prestige, are legal binds that directly affect Heathcliff's development, and build him as an "alien" character, a person whose physical appearance, moreover, make him unable to "pass" as an authentic member of the Earnshaws (Ward 52-55). The fee simple pertaining to the Heights and its surrounding fields can easily be obtained by Heathcliff as mortgagee (Hindley mortgages everything he owns in order to subsidize his alcoholism), while the acquisition of the Grange entails more intricate scheming on Heathcliff's (and Edgar's) part on behalf of their offspring. A scheming that plays a considerable part in the novel's plot in its latter half, and touches on customary application of hereditary law: the primacy of male heirs over females, the possibility granted husbands to fully acquire and administer their wives' estates and capitals. The desire supporting Heathcliff'

accumulation of capital is, crucially, its very own annihilation, the dissolution of the richness and status of both Earnshaws and Lintons. The land itself, however, remains untouched (if not for agricultural work), unperturbed by human machinations. Greenery can, at its most active, become a further source for conflict in human cohabitation. In a scene towards the closing of the novel, Hareton and the second Catherine (who both live at the Heights, following Catherine's forced marriage with Heathcliff's sickly son Linton), decide to repurpose a patch of earth close to the house. They are halfway through with pulling weeds and shrubs from the patch, which they intend to turn into a flower bed, when Heathcliff calls them out, forbidding them to proceed any further. Catherine's reply affirms her responsibility, but her tone is confrontational, and the exchange escalates quickly:

The latter [Hareton] was speechless; his cousin [Catherine] replied— "You shouldn't grudge a few yards of earth for me to ornament, when you have taken all my land!" "Your land, insolent slut! You never had any," said Heathcliff. "And my money," she continued; returning his angry glare, and meantime biting a piece of crust, the remnant of her breakfast. "Silence!" he exclaimed. "Get done, and begone!" "And Hareton's land, and his money," pursued the reckless thing. "Hareton and I are friends now; and I shall tell him all about you!" The master seemed confounded a moment: he grew pale, and rose up, eyeing her all the while, with an expression of mortal hate. (Brontë, 319)

The aforementioned scene is, as is customary, absent from the majority of film adaptations, which tend to end with first Catherine's death. Still, it highlights a series of intertwined ideas about the "use" (from enjoyment to exploitation) of nature that film adaptations can help make visible: land can be a financial asset, a workplace, a decoration. The metonymic potential embedded in the scene's substitution of the patch of dirt for the hereditary land patrimony, along with their respective ownership and control, for instance, informs the utility/aesthetic binary that Andrea Arnold will subsequently pick up on with her own 2011 *Wuthering Heights*. The "ornamental" objective that Catherine pursues with her flower sowing complicates the "wilderness" trope attached to nature in *Wuthering Heights*: the wish and capacity to direct vegetable life for a purely "pleasant" objective seems in keeping with the labour-conscious vision of the novel that Arnold will achieve. That there is a beauty attached to certain organic

objects – one that evokes forms of pleasure other than the sublime(y), romantic scopophilic enjoyment of wild open environments – appears as the principle that confers Arnold's visuals their depth and volume. Nevertheless, the alternation and compresence of a variety of spaces, especially when the human eye is made evident, albeit not present, enhances the layered translations of nature from page to screen, but remains a distinct feature of the text as well. John P. Farrell describes the texture of *Wuthering Heights* as “a pleating of texts” (175) as a way to connote the juxtaposition of voices, stories, roles and power stances that make up the community at the heart of the novel. The “community” he ascribes as the narrative epicentre and “*telos*” (Farrell 177) of *Wuthering Heights* is, however, a conceptual struggle for Brontë, who was working within, and against, a (literary) tradition that was observing (and would attempt to describe) the widening gap between social order and individual/local agency. Farrell's emphasis on community can clarify the narrative development as propelled by such conflation of individual and societal friction, but is also instrumental by way of his identification of a “symbolic code of doors, locks, windows, keys, and gates” (175). A code, however, that Farrell sees as a limited reference to the text itself only: the divisions and demarcations brought into existence by walls and fences is akin to the textual boundaries that the reader wants to penetrate (175). Farrell writes of a “tiering or laminating effect” (175) achieved with the Brontë's modelling of time and plot, but I would argue that the doors, locks, windows, keys, and gates he mentions compose a code that is as material on the symbolic/intradiegetic levels as it is contextually and outside the diegesis. Brontë's choice of a late eighteenth century setting for *Wuthering Heights* situates the fictive action upon a shifting economic background, namely, at the tail end of the enclosure process. The community at the centre of *Wuthering Heights* seems, above all, embedded into a larger historical and (mainly) agricultural venture: the innovative possibility to harness centuries of feudalistic-like relationship between the land and its hereditary owners through the power of jurisprudence. The slow crisis of the ancient model of local agricultural (semi)autarchy and the communal sharing of *commons*, which had started around the sixteenth century, came to its conclusion between late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Full enclosure of privately-owned, but communally-shared pastures and uncultivated lands was completed in order to

ensure full availability of such resources to their lawful owners. Intensive exploitation of arable land would break the intrapersonal ties that had granted free access to such spaces for centuries, and eventually push families and individuals devoid of property or lease contracts to abandon the country for city suburbs. The erection of wooden fences and dry stone walls to clearly circumscribe property borders changed social landscapes as well as geography. In her philosophical overview of the history of animal exploitation, *Così perfetti e utili* (2015), Benedetta Piazzesi ascribes a crucial role to land enclosure within the genealogy of capitalist growth, especially as a symbolic intellectual shift:

Farms are no longer the autarchic unit of production and consumption, they therefore disperse their functions throughout the national body, which will replicate, on a much larger scale, their same complexity and tension towards productive self-sufficiency. Society develops a continuous and obsessive discourse about indigence and prosperity, establishing a diametrical opposition between the two, which dispels and removes the demon of poverty and chases the demon of riches. (122, my translation)

A culture that prizes individual entrepreneurship is needed in order to sustain the system of structural precarity and quick change that capitalist production and investments impose. Heathcliff's cunning familiarity with the laws that allow him to grab both Earnshaw and Linton properties shapes the narrative *evidently*, while Brontë chooses to merely hint at the kind of quick business that allowed Heathcliff to accumulate ready cash in the first place. Therefore, when she was drafting her novel in the mid-1840s, Brontë may have already been keen on describing the underbelly of the new economic paradigm she was living in. In *Fiction and Repetition*, Joseph Hillis Miller defined the strategy of *Wuthering Heights* as akin to the structure of a detective story: the state of savage near-lawlessness that readers, through Lockwood, encounter – as if they had found a murdered body – is slowly reconstructed, backwards, to understand how things came to deteriorate (43). Brontë's intention, Miller argues in another essay, "Emily Brontë", is to show domestic brutality at its maximum not as a condemnation of the same, but rather as a reflective dismissal of Lockwood's parallel form of courteous, socialised violence (97). The violence that concerned Brontë, Miller seems to argue, is a greater form of moral permissibility and cultural masking than mere insularity and reciprocal bestiality. In Terry Eagleton's professedly marxist take on the Brontë sisters'

catalogue – his 1975 essay collection *A Marxist Study of the Brontës* – his interest towards descriptions and functions of labour and workplaces is a key to exegesis. Heathcliff's parable of economic and social ascent (or descent, according one's moral inclinations) concentrates the social transformations underway at the cusp of the nineteenth century: the accumulation of capital outside agrarian production framework is prescient of the bourgeois class' capability and willingness to "expropriate the expropriators" (Eagleton 115), and carve their way into the control and ownership of landed properties. At the heart of the novel's fictional matter, Eagleton situates the irreconcilable, "ineradicable" (100) distinction and conflict between "passion and society" (100). However, such conflict, Eagleton argues, is not posited as a romantic dynamic between its young protagonists, but rather as a conceptual struggle, shown at its nuclear level as involving a small, but permeable, community of two families. The sentimental bond between Catherine and Heathcliff thus becomes an affinity between similarly weak and disposable members of the social family unity that is, first and foremost, an economic engine. While Heathcliff's subordinate position as the Earnshaws' adoptee – along with his obscure, "fabled" origins – is a fundamental narrative feature, the fact that Catherine "as the daughter of the family, is the least economically integral member" (Eagleton 103) and knows that she will be excluded from the line of inheritance, is less obvious. Furthermore, Eagleton fascinatingly implies that Catherine's awareness of her own material limitations (as well as Heathcliff's) should play a bigger role in readers' understanding of her motives for rejecting Heathcliff as a husband (102-3). Nevertheless, it is the equally low-level status they share, Eagleton argues, that fosters their friendship. Moreover, the iconic place/space dynamic that surrounds the telling of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship – their moor-roaming above all – further exemplifies their need to escape the Heights' violent environment, while encapsulating the harsh conditions that pushed them outside in the first place. Freedom to roam in the wild, uncultivated, unclaimed pieces of land around the Earnshaw farm is, Eagleton argues, "merely a function of cultural impoverishment" (104): a behaviour that, while nominally tolerated, also stigmatises those that indulge in it as "lesser than", and therefore giving in as a pretext to assert their subjugation. Eagleton discusses at length the significance of the nature/society dichotomy in the

novel, as well as its grey areas: human degradation to animal-like level of exploitation to assure social hierarchy on the one hand, naturalization of new-fangled societal values to underpin a new production paradigm on the other. He skirts, however, any appraisal of the material nature that Brontë wove through her prose. By failing to ask who the moor belongs to, Eagleton does not seem to attach any specific significance to the fact that Catherine and Heathcliff experience their relationship in a space that looks unfit for either agricultural and industrial exploitation. After all, Brontë's natural backdrops remain virtually unchanged from beginning to end: trees, skies, bushes and hills keep up their role as local timepieces: they indicate the season, they reflect the weather, they confer depth to the geography of the novel. In short, they merely frame human actions. Nevertheless, the value, for the literary and popular reputation of the novel, that such natural framing has come to acquire over time – and over the narrative framing that characterises *Wuthering Heights* as a text – may have something to do with the genealogy of film adaptations.

The wider reach of film visuals, along with the medium's capability and propensity to capture snippets of beautiful scenery, can only partly be held to account for the turistification of the real geographical locations that films claim to portray. Contemporary tourism industry and real-estate trade are able to monetise the celebrity and interest that world-wide distribution of heritage-conscious film productions can raise. Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, West Yorkshire, is but the best-known nexus of the tourist network and industry that thrives at the cusp of cultural curiosity for the life of the Brontës and celebrity pilgrimage at their birthplace and unique source of inspiration. Besides Brontë-centric consumption of the territory, however, is the exploitation of "rurality" as an asset in the real-estate market. Smith and Phillips (2001) employ the term "greentrification" to describe the soaring relevance that ideas such as "remote", "village" and "rural" have acquired as real-estate buzzwords with regards to the Pennine region in Yorkshire.⁷³ The case study in Smith and Phillips' research is the village and

⁷³ Geographers D.P. Smith and D.A. Phillips's paper proved particularly relevant to my argument as it addresses specifically the geographical area that literary and filmic adaptations reference. Socio-geographical research on the topic of rurality and gentrification in the UK is, needless to say, wide-ranging, among them: *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*, edited by Loretta Lees and Martin Phillips

district of Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire: a dainty-looking network of villages with a shared population of around 14.500, nestled uphill at the moor edge, or scattered on moor tops, in a key position halfway between Leeds and Manchester, a mere 8 miles distance from Halifax (and 8 miles from Haworth). The Hebden Bridge district has enjoyed since the 1970's a reputation for its LGBTQ-friendly hamlets⁷⁴ and as a popular artists' and hippie/yuppie retreat, a cheap place to buy and restore derelict properties. Despite the lower villages' proneness to floods, house prices have been growing steadily and peaked in the 1990s, and the town has undergone changes similar to those generally ascribed to gentrified urban areas: rent price spikes, gradual exclusion of low income and/or racialized inhabitants and their substitution with more affluent social groups, the closure, displacement or transformation of affordable services into outlets and venues catering primarily to the new, wealthier inhabitants. Smith and Phillips argue, however, that Hebden Bridge and similar "rural" places present specific issues

(2018). Martin Phillips' paper "Rural Gentrification and the Processes of Class Colonisation" (1993) provided me with the methodological context necessary to think about rurality and gentrifying migration in tandem, rather than as a process of counter-urbanisation. Moreover, Phillips' argument that among the most relevant specifics of "rural gentrification" is the stark imbalance of income between property-buying newcomers and lower-income settled communities resonated deeply with the reading of *Wuthering Heights* as a story of economic distress that I have attempted so far.

⁷⁴ Darren Smith and Louise Holt explore the issue in their paper "'Lesbian Migrants in the Gentrified Valley' and 'Other' Geographies of Rural Gentrification" (2005). Smith and Holt argue that the unusually high concentration of LGBTQ households in Hebden Bridge is, however, in keeping with customary gentrifying practices and patterns and that therefore, the "minority" classification of such in-migrants makes little to no (positive) difference in the gentrification of the area. A 2016 *Financial Times* article by Tory Kingdon openly discusses the markedly "gay-friendly" character of the village – going as far as mentioning supposedly unmistakable cyphers of LGBTQ culture such as "vegan cafés" and "craft shops" – and backs up its toponym "lesbian capital of the UK". Furthermore, Kingdon opens her article invoking the Brontesque reputation of the place:

The west Yorkshire landscape described by Emily Brontë is a place of moody stretches of moorland and dark, desolate valleys: "Oh, these bleak winds, and bitter, northern skies, and impassable roads," laments Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*. So it is surprising, then, to find among such surroundings a colourful town known as the 'lesbian capital of the UK. (Kingdon)

related to their being set in the countryside, which their neologism, “greentrification” attempts to indicate (457). Natural landscape, seemingly untainted “green” spaces, and non-urban, small communities can easily become marketable commodities that, in the present cultural framework, are appealing to urbanized middle classes with a disposable income. “Socially constructed ‘rural’ spaces provide new leisure spaces, and positive (and exclusive) associations with nature and ‘natural products’” (458) note Smith and Phillips, and intangible cultural assets attached to such spaces – for instance, a cult of nostalgia, the longing for an imaginary “simpler” lifestyle in the country – play in the wish to affirm one’s social status through the purchase of rural land and/or property. The aspirational lifestyle attached to greentrification is one – Smith and Phillips quote their interviewees saying – imbued with ideas of idyllic rurality and the search for therapeutic solitude and mental remoteness, healing through exposure to “nature”. The silence that allegedly allows the self to flourish, the healthy and slow environment all come with an attachment to an imaginary cultural geography which is distinctly “British” and “white” (462, 464). Links with the country’s (sanitized) past are pursued and strengthened by means of the performative espousal of traditional Pennine farmer-weaver actions (such as chopping logs or raising chickens) and lobbying for the material preservation of such “authentic” images from modern development (463). Smith and Phillips report how, among the “in-migrants”, “[...] many became involved in a campaign to oppose a wind-farm planned for the moor tops. Their arguments against the proposed development were replete with Brontë references and the need to save the cultural heritage of the Brontë landscape which they valued” (463-4). “Brontë constructs of rurality” (464) appear crucial in Smith and Phillips’ interview and census-based research: the “Brontë” in these instances of socially-constructed rurality evokes a harsh landscape, a space that looks and feels wild, insular, and characterized by extremely unpleasant weather. The implied ties to the national literary canon, moreover, are unlikely to be lost on the greentrifying property-owners, who, in Smith and Phillips’ demographic profiling, come across as predominantly white, privately-educated university graduates, who regularly commute to the surrounding urban centres to pursue their high-paying and high-skilled professional careers. To take pride (and to recognize its social symbolism) in organizing one’s life around the native lands of

intellectual figures of near-mythical fame means to participate in that same myth-making marketisation of the Brontës literary heritage. Ideas about the place derived from cultural influence and ideas about the places as described in the texts are enmeshed in a relationship of mutual influence. Like images, ideas about what these local spots should look like are passed on and received in a variety of ways, literature being just the most conventional of channels. The cultural capital that is so valuable (and profitable) needs a foundational social agreement on the positive, desirable character of such places and stories: film (-making and -watching) might work as a vicarious experience of the same fanciful rurality that only a few wealthy owners get to experience first hand. The next chapter section will try to expound upon such conceptual heritage and how film adaptations – specifically Andrea Arnold’s most recent one – foster, modify and invent ideas about human presence in natural spaces.

3.3. Anthropized Landscapes: Repurposing the Sources in Andrea Arnold’s *Wuthering Heights* (2011)

The unnamed protagonist and narrator of Anne Carson’s lyrical critique *The Glass Essay*⁷⁵ turns to the outdoor space for consolation after a painful breakup. “Crops of ice are changing to mud all around me / as I push on across the moor / warmed by drifts from the pale blue sun” (verse 180). This character, who the reader understands to be a

⁷⁵ Anne Carson’s 990-verse text was first published in her 1995 collection *Glass, Irony and God*. In his critical analysis, “Verglas: Narrative Technique in Anne Carson’s ‘The Glass Essay’”, Ian Rae treats the poem as an exemplary specimen of Carson’s idiosyncratic blend of scholarly literary exegesis with her personal, almost sentimental responses to texts, the themes they tackle and the experience of the authors who thought them out. Rae notices how Carson addresses research and reflection through a combination of paratactic and hypotactic textual constructions: she borrows the lyrical elasticity of the former and the technical conventions of the latter (164). Therefore, Carson seems to develop her narrative and her argument by means of, alternatively, unsignaled jumps from one topic to the other, and rhetorical layering of her line of reasoning (Rae, 164). *The Glass Essay* functions as a reaction to Emily Brontë’s biographical mythopoeia inasmuch as quotations from Brontë’s works are placed alongside interpretations of her lived experience, as well as by consistent refraction against Carson’s first-person narrative protagonist. Despite its unorthodox approach to sources and interpretation, Carson’s work proves highly insightful, especially with regards to the treatment of space – both anthropized and supposedly “natural” – as a transmissible trope.

woman, leaves her city dwelling to spend some time at her mother's house, where she alternates reading, and quoting, from *The Collected works of Emily Brontë* and solitary walking in a rugged, open environment. The thematic similarities that Carson's protagonist links between Brontë's descriptions of a plausible Yorkshire mountainous space and the moor-like Canadian landscape she explores during her lovesick hikes are indicative of the displaceable potential pertaining to nature in *Wuthering Heights*. Carson's photographic snippets describe a "low swampy place" (verse 846), where winter snow is melting into muddy pools, but still "the swamp water is frozen solid" (verse 847). The fact that "bits of gold weed" (verse 848) are visible through the ice does not improve the bleak ambiance. It does, however, confirm cold, open patches of earth as the foremost site for heightened experiences of soul-searching. Carson's transnational superposition of wintry landscapes, however, is also one of the many examples of Brontëan cross-pollination occurring all over creative media. Emily Brontë's mystical presence is embedded in the popular reputation of *Wuthering Heights*, and a very specific weather forecast – predictions of rain, hail, sleet, wind, overcast skies and below-zero temperatures – is paramount. Examples as countless, I will only mention a couple and briefly discuss their interpretative policies.

May Sinclair's fictional portrayal, in her novel *The Three Sisters* (1914), presents Gwenda – the Emily-like character – as a lonesome hiker who wittingly projects a suitor's hypothetical gaze onto her walking on the moors. Sinclair was a self-trained scholar of eastern and western mystical traditions, which she combined in her writing (both fictional and essayistic) with her personal philosophy. Sinclair was heavily influenced by British suffrage-oriented feminism (she was a member of the WSPU-adjacent Women Writers' Suffrage League, which operated from 1908 to 1919)⁷⁶ besides Continental Idealism and psychoanalytic theories.⁷⁷ These streaks are,

⁷⁶ Feminine, feminist and para-feminist public engagement at the turn of the twentieth century (with specific mentions to May Sinclair) are summarized by Sowon Park and Maren Linett in their chapter "Political Activism and Women's Modernism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers* (edited by Maren Linett, 2010).

⁷⁷ May Sinclair showed a profound interest, in both her writing and individual research, towards different approaches to the understanding of human conscious and subconscious life. She acquired scholarly

arguably, either latent or explicitly evident in her 1914 novel *The Three Sisters*. A couple years earlier, Sinclair had opened her treatise on the Brontës – *The Three Brontës* (1912) – with an endorsement of the unbreakable bond between the Brontës and their native territory:

It is impossible to write of the three Brontës and forget the place they lived in, the black-grey, naked village, bristling like a rampart on the clean edge of the moor; the street, dark and steep as a gully, climbing the hill to the Parsonage at the top; the small oblong house, naked and grey, hemmed in on two sides by the graveyard, its five windows flush with the wall, staring at the graveyard where the tombstones, grey and naked, are set so close that the grass hardly grows between. [...] It is the genius of the Brontës that made their place immortal; but it is the soul of the place that made their genius what it is. You cannot exaggerate its importance. They drank and were saturated with Haworth. (*The Three Brontës*)

While Sinclair's scholarly inquiry attempts a redefinition of the sisters' (especially Emily's) mystical understanding of the world, the very genre she is writing in prevents her from fully exploring her subjects' inner life. The fictional form can, perhaps, grant some form of respectful privacy to the Brontës as inspirations (whose portrait, however, features on some book covers), while providing the author ample space to speculate about their psychological developments. Sinclair's triangulation, however, does not link the fictional Brontës – "Mary, Gwendolen, and Alice, daughters of James Cartaret, the Vicar of Garth, [sitting] there in the dining-room behind the yellow blind, doing nothing" (Sinclair, 3) – to the open territory they inhabit and to the literary works they pen. Life at

knowledge of occult and supernatural phenomena, and throughout the 1920s she attended *séances* hoping to reach contact with her deceased brother. In 1914 she became a member of the Society for Psychical Research and devoted herself to the amatorial study of psychoanalysis. Ingmar and Linett suggest, in their essay "Religion and the Occult in Women's Modernism" (in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women Writers*, edited by Maren Linett, 2010), that titles such as *Uncanny Stories* testify to Sinclair's attempt to conflate occultism and Freudian psychoanalysis (199), and that her loyalty to Christian traditional thought led her to develop "her own brand of mysticism" (192) which could harmonise with everyday reality, rather than escape from it.

the rural margins, for the Cartaret sisters, feels like punishment: their strict vicar father has forced their move to Yorkshire as the drastic measure resulting from an unspecified familiar disgrace. Their relationship, moreover, is not one of cooperation and mutual support, but a jealousy-propelled triangle: each of the sisters falls under the charm of the newly-arrived, “eligible” bachelor doctor Steven Rowcliffe. Sinclair’s operation does not so much recast the Brontës as the lovesick protagonists of a lurid plotline, as it conflates private mental states with a necessarily heightened emotive and cognitive existential mode. The Brontës’ dichotomic swings between elation and distress are reiterated and made public, made visible for the reader’s own pleasure.

While Sinclair recurs to the novel form to invent a hypothetical mindscape for the Brontës, photographer Bill Brandt similarly crafts a fanciful view of “Brontë Country” by arranging selected features of its authentic geographical correlative, Yorkshire county (see fig. 17). Some of the keywords chosen by the Bill Brandt Archive⁷⁸ to accompany his meticulously crafted 1945 photograph of Top Withens – the abandoned farmhouse close to Haworth Parsonage thought to have inspired Brontë’s Heights – are “broody”, “cloud”, “windstorm”, “lonely” and “mystery”. From 1948 to 1951 Brandt travelled through Britain on commission for *Lilliput* magazine, taking pictures of geographical landmarks associated to British literary writers and their work. As Alexandra Harris puts it: “[...] while literary critics investigated the effect of landscape on writers, Brandt put the process into reverse by testing the effect of writers on country” (161).

⁷⁸ The estate managing sales and rights for English photographer Bill Brandt’s work offers a brief description of each photograph on online display. A snippet of the “Top Withens” photo I mention, along with its relevant search keywords, can be viewed on the Bill Brandt Archive website:

billbrandtarchive.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Landscape/G0000tfbKhIMAmYY/I00001pgSLiYSEHw.

Accessed 11 February 2021.



Fig. 17. Left, detail from Bill Brandt's 1945 "Top Withens" photograph, the Yorkshire farmhouse that allegedly inspired Brontë's own *Wuthering Heights*. Right, a dramatic landscape shot from Wyler's classic 1939 film adaptation *Wuthering Heights*.

The result was *Literary Britain*, a photographic compendium of "landmarks, landscapes and houses of the great writers and poets", as the caption on the cover boasts, published in 1951. Brandt chooses lyrical titles like "Gull's Nest, late on midsummer night, Isle of Skye, After Boswell" (a picture taken in 1947, featuring a dramatic monochrome juxtaposition of a mountainous background and a bird's nest on the foreground), and accompanies each picture with a textual caption highlighting the direct relationship between his subjects: the author on the one hand, the material landscape on the other. "Top Withens, West Riding, Yorkshire, After Emily Brontë" exemplifies Brandt's intellectual approach to image-making: not strictly documentary in its scope, rather, highly imaginative, and relying on craft-related aspects of photography to reach their impactful effects. Brandt travelled three times to the former West Riding of Yorkshire (now West Yorkshire County: Brandt presumably visited the areas surrounding the Pennine Chain), at different seasonal times of the year (summer, late autumn and late winter) in order to capture the kind of harsh weather that best suited his vision of the *Wuthering Heights* landscape as a gloomy environment. The final result, however, is a "collage of pictures" (Harris 161): the overcast sky was cut from a different picture, the

negatives were over-exposed so as to create a sharp contrast between black low bushes and white grass covering the slope. Therefore, Brandt's landscapes – among others (see fig. 18) – portray an imaginary Britain, a land that uses its literary history as mirror: not to better understand itself, but rather, as a device to project a fanciful ideal, especially with regards to the look of its open spaces.

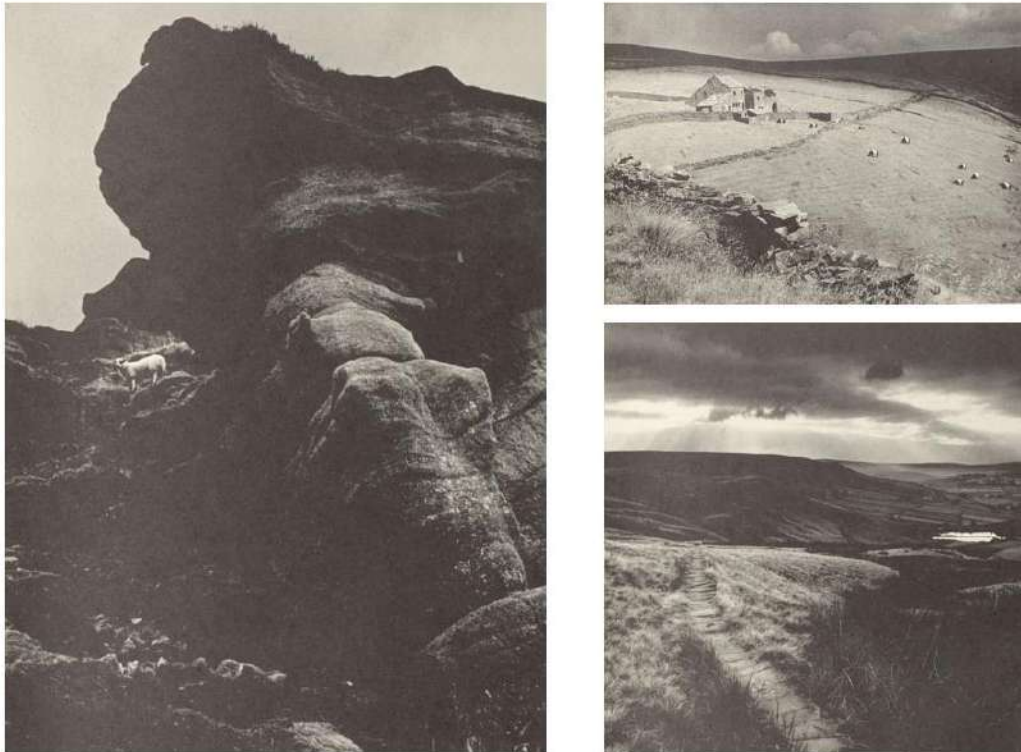


Fig. 18. Photographs by Fay Godwin accompanying Ted Hughes' 1979 poetic "pennine sequence" *Remains of Elmet* (*The Rainbow Press*, later republished in *Three Books*, Faber & Faber, 1993). Both works create a dialogue to document the material and spiritual life of the Calder Valley, West Yorkshire (Hughes' birthplace), which Hughes thus describes in his preface: "For centuries it was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hide-out for refugees. Then in the early 1800s it became the cradle for the Industrial Revolution in textiles, and the upper Calder became 'the hardest-worked river in England'" (introductory note in *Remains of Elmet* 2011).

The original idea that I wanted to develop with this chapter section revolved around the twofold approach to sources that informs Andrea Arnold's 2011 adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*: the filmic canon on the one hand, and the scrupulous reading of the novel on

the other. Arnold's reading and screening process seems highly receptive to a wide intertextual tradition that has blurred the line between authorship and novelistic matter. Conservatism in creating a wild and emotionally-responsive backdrop in Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* works together with an accurate reading of the original text, which results, for instance, in a black-skinned Heathcliff.⁷⁹ Arnold's foremost achievement, however, is her debunking of the myth of a pristine Brontë Land, the paradoxical mix of soggy trails and nuanced greys contained within a curated touristy infrastructure. The ideological conceit of the "wild moors" in Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* – I would have argued – is simultaneously employed to tackle contemporary and highly sensitive themes. Therefore, Arnold's haptic cinematography, square ratio and a-narrative shots would appear to channel essentialist ideas about *Wuthering Heights* and its wild open spaces, while also imbuing them with ecological and political concerns. Repeated viewings and readings of *Wuthering Heights*, however, eventually insinuated some form of doubt towards an interpretative line that echoes the insights posited by other reviewers and scholars. The escalating tones in cultural debates about climate emergency, moreover, further weakened my fascination with the idea that narratives – either literary or cinematic – could in any way be readable in ecologically aware terms. Instead, it brought me back to the adaptation mechanism operating at its core, and further research highlighted iterations of the natural themes that Arnold brings forth that, although less prominent, are nonetheless symptomatic of specific cultural inclinations. My musings are unable to resolve the quest for a truly ecological response to the portrayal of nature in film and literature, but strive, however, to follow how the perception of what anthropomorphic penetration into the natural landscape can shift in time and in between places, and how it adapts what it looks like and what it means.

British director Andrea Arnold has shaped her film career around the exploration of the intersecting effects on her characters of deprived backgrounds, socio-geographical decentering, and emotional seclusion. The focus on young people – ranging from toddlers and children to angsty teenagers and barely-adult parents – includes Arnold's overarching theme of loneliness as the result of either abandonment or (often self-imposed) isolation. Her 2003 short film *Wasp* and 2009 feature film *Fish Tank*, for

⁷⁹ The racial subtext that Arnold renders evident will be dealt with later in this chapter section.

instance, are in conversation with regards to the phenomenology of working-class women's life, especially single mothers'. *Fish Tank's* Joanne (Kierston Wareing) updates the ethical struggle that had already troubled *Wasp's* Zoe (Natalie Press): both young mothers strive to reconcile their wish for a satisfactory individual life with the needs of their children and the societal expectation that they give themselves up completely to their care, despite (and because of) the lack of structural assistance. Arnold charts the passage from adolescence to young adulthood in contexts where supervision and mentorship are scarce: *Fish Tank's* Mia (Kate Jarvis) and 2016 feature *American Honey's* Star (Sasha Lane) seek like-minded communities outside conventional routes, such as stantial jobs, sites of education or vocational training, and carve their identity out of what little resources and companionship is available to them. Arnold is also especially attuned to haptic visuals and notions of gaze: watching and being watched are foundational dynamics in her work, both as explicit themes and cinematic tropes. *Red Road* (2006) broaches the topic as a direct narrative pivot: Jackie (Kate Dickie) is a CCTV operator who spends her working hours fantasizing about the lives and identities of those she observes from the monitor, and her free time shunning contact with people. *Wuthering Heights*, on the other hand, is built around carefully crafted images that evoke tactile presence: manifold suggestions of softness, wetness, roughness, chilliness, suppleness connote the narrative development of plot and characters, who, in turn, are engaged in a complex mirroring of controlling and desiring gazes. *Wuthering Heights* is, as of the time of writing, the only Arnold production based on a script she did not penned herself from scratch. Moreover, Arnold was approached by producer Robert Bernstein when the *Wuthering Heights* production was well underway: she undertook the project as director in substitution of Robert Webber in 2010, and proceeded to form a new cast of non-professional or debutant actors.⁸⁰ International household names had previously been attached with the production: Natalie Portman, Abbie Cornish and Gemma Arterton had all been cast as Catherine, while Michael Fassbender and Ed

⁸⁰ The news was announced in January 2010. Ben Child's 2010 article for *The Guardian* quotes producer Robert Bernstein stating that Arnold had been approached because of a previous statement of hers: "the only book she would ever direct would be *Wuthering Heights*, because of the passionate, impossible love story at its centre and its elements of class divide".

Westwick had been selected to play Heathcliff. Rather than rely on more mature figures to embody Catherine and Heathcliff throughout the narrative arch, Arnold opted for fidelity to ages and physical descriptions in the novel as casting criteria: barely-teenage Solomon Glave and Shannor Beer would play Heathcliff and Catherine as children pals, while twenty-somethings Kaya Scodelario and James Howson would play their “adult”, but still highly tormented counterpart. Arnold’s choice of a duo of black actors for the Heathcliff role is in keeping with the novel’s statement that “He is a dark-skinned gipsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman [...]” (Brontë 5). It is also a sensitive choice that aligns Arnold with the upsurge of period adaptations which, in recent years, have reinstated the presence of black and minority ethnics characters/performers in heritage narratives. Increased diversity is not simply intended as a form of tokenism or blind-casting, but as a historically accurate representation of Britain’s variegated societal composition, the exposure of a well-documented feature that accompanied the growth and establishment of Britain’s colonial empire (specifically through slave trade), rather than a consequence of its fragmentation. The political underpinnings of Arnold’s casting are indeed fascinating and worthy of further discussion,⁸¹ yet do not seem to

⁸¹ Tentative explorations of this theme are present in Stella Hockenull’s chapter “Picturesque, pastoral and dirty: uncivilised topographies in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*” and in Sue Thornham’s paper “‘Not a country at all’: Landscape and *Wuthering Heights*”. In his paper “Nature and the Non-human in Andrea Arnold’s *Wuthering Heights*”, Michael Lawrence addresses the topic of Heathcliff’s explicit blackness by reading him as “the victim (and the avenger) of a specifically racist mode of prejudice, abuse and violence” (191) and by linking him with 1770s Liverpool – where Heathcliff allegedly ails from – as Britain’s major slaving port. Furthermore, in her doctoral thesis, María Seijo Richart insightfully notes, with regards to Arnold’s adaptation, that: “Heathcliff has not always been white on the screen (he has been Hindi, Pinoy, Persian and Japanese). Nevertheless, it is the first time in the film transpositions of the novel that the story is deliberately depicted as an interracial relation [...]” (59). Seijo Richart also comments briefly on actress Merle Oberon’s passing as white despite her biracial ancestry: a fact that Oberon herself (and her studio producers/employers) attempted to control and erase throughout her career, going as far as bleaching her skin to assuage her “exotic” complexion. Nelly Dean notoriously daydreams with Heathcliff about his mysterious origin: “Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen, each of them able to buy up, with one week’s income, *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange* together? And you were kidnapped by wicked sailors and brought to England.” (Brontë 58). It is somewhat ironic that, in Wyler’s iconic *Wuthering Heights*

radically impact her filmic language and overarching thematic interests. Once again, Arnold tackles ideas of individual growth from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood; how individuality clashes against material and geographical circumstances, while being inexorably shaped by one's context (see fig. 19). The period adaptation and literary reputation of *Wuthering Heights* do not so much offer her the opportunity to draft a history of artificial concepts such as "teen age", as the space to cast contemporary preoccupations and notions against a stripped-down background. Arnold's experiments with individuality and isolation are situated in a sort of vacuum, a purportedly "wild" environment that stands as far as possible from overpopulated cityscapes and the politics of communal welfare, where characters' stories equal their purest, unmediated feelings. Arnold's adaptation peels narrative and physical framings from a notoriously indoor novel. It also eschews the society drama and layered plotting that have been variably retrieved in previous adaptations, such as Wyler's 1939 Hollywood romance, Buñuel's 1954 Mexican soap-opera *Abismos de pasión*, and Rivette 1985 minimalistic French farmyard melodrama *Hurlevent*.⁸² Arnold's wild environment, on the other hand, seems to match with the moors Anne Carson described in 1994 with *The Glass Essay*: "there is no sunset / just some movements inside the light and then a sinking away" (verse 319). While Arnold's most prominent feat may be her prolonged focus on dirt and use of mud, her presentation of light and the quality of air is equally crucial to narrative development. Carson talks about "knives of light" (verse 165) when outlining her protagonist's outdoor exposure, and Arnold similarly materialises the light trajectories that her cinematographer, Robbie Ryan, captures. The film manages to remain Heights-centric for much of its first part, and when the Grange finally appears it is rather as an intrusion, than as a counterpoint.

melodrama the Asian connection and imperial subtext should be provided by British-born Catherine herself through Oberon, rather than by "gypsy" Heathcliff/Laurence Olivier.

⁸² Buñuel's and Rivette's adaptation will be better dealt with in the following chapter section, "World moors", which deals specifically with transnational adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*.



Fig. 19. Landscape evolution compared to human protagonists' own growth in *Wuthering Heights*.

The children, Cathy and Heathcliff accidentally discover the Grange during one of their roaming walks in the fields: the house is not presented as a man-made landmark, but as a flicker in the distance. The hierarchical imbalance between the Heights and the Grange is not explicit: the Grange may either be a shining trap or a beacon in an otherwise opaque, fuzzy, dirty world. The light that is absorbed by dark, solid materials up at the Heights hits upon crystal reflections, forms rainbows and sparkly effects down at the Grange. Light beams penetrating glasses, however, do not highlight a supposed liminal space signalled by windows: the outside/inside divide is superfluous, almost nonexistent. Things may be shinier, gilded even at the Linton mansion, but are not necessarily neater or cleaner than at the Heights. Anthropomorphic footprint is made visible and gradually takes over any appraisal of the wildlife and supposedly “wild” spaces. The process that Arnold seems to be putting on show, which becomes clearer from the instant the glittering Grange comes into view, is rather one of domestication. Arnold treats nature as she treats the Earnshaw family farm: as a site of labour. A human project that she breaks down to its elementary parts, namely, the hard and dirty forms of work and segregation that sustain a certain level of decorum: for the domestic productivity on display is not so much a form of tamedness as the total eradication of unruly features of the space (see figure 20).

In a 2011 review for the *Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw argues that Arnold’s adaptation “is not presented as another layer of interpretation, superimposed on a classic’s frills and those of all the other remembered versions, but an attempt to create something that might have existed before the book, something on which the book might have been based.” The idea of an unmarred state of existence predating human observation has proven popular among critics and scholars alike. Sue Thornham, for instance, argues, quoting Jonathan Bordo, that Arnold builds “‘landscape without a figural witness’: shots of the moors which are unmotivated by either narrative demands or a character’s point of view” (222). Michael Lawrence also argues for a non-narrative mode of filming, and calls Arnold’s landscape shots “unmotivated” (178). He also adds, when describing the source text: “While the novel is routinely understood as Romantic, the natural environment is very rarely described in any detail by the various narrators, and there are only a few isolated instances in which the pathetic fallacy is utilised” (181).



Fig. 20. Arnold posits the Heights as a site of labour, and makes her characters' working hours visible. Clockwise from top left: a dress hung outside to dry; Heathcliff and a group of men building a dry stone wall; Nelly carries a basket; Heathcliff digs a hole in the ground.

While a good number of still frames are, indeed, compliant with this definition, it is the landscape as background or as a prop that prompts the most interesting questions: can natural elements ever be seen as neutral items in the context of a novel as preoccupied with land ownership and inheritance as *Wuthering Heights*? Stances such as Thornham's and Lawrence's, as a matter of fact, prioritise the a-narrative features of the film medium – visual composition and hapticality – over the very film's adapting operations. While the use of pathetic fallacy as narrative strategy (employed by filmmakers), or as a critical metaphor (employed by scholars) can, indeed, signal the need for a safe, albeit unoriginal, vocabulary, the significance of open natural spaces follows patterns that differ from straightforwardly univocal translation and/or

aestheticization. It appears difficult to exclude the “safer”, better known solution of pathetic fallacy – thus equating the outdoors to human feelings and mental state – and adopt any approach towards the human-nature connection that does not spark from, or inevitably revolve around an anthropocentric perspective.

Stella Hockenhull, for instance, claims that Arnold’s use of flora and fauna fosters narrative meaning on top of aesthetic visual development. She does so, in fact, in “Picturesque, Pastoral and Dirty: Uncivilised Topographies in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*”, a book chapter that takes into account both the novel source and its filmic adaptation (or adaptations, where a tradition is present, as is the case for *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*). Pathetic fallacy is, however, a critical trope Hockenhull recognises in Arnold’s adaptation, specifically in the reiteration of unpleasant outdoor situations in connection with characters’ analogous instances of sentimental unpleasantness. The tone Hockenhull ascribes to Arnold’s nature shots sits in the register of sublime:

Lone windswept trees, seen from a low angle, struggle on the horizon as though mirroring the hardships experienced by the couple and, at the end of the film, branches from nearby vegetation clatter against Heathcliff’s bedroom window, suggesting Cathy’s persisting presence long after her death. (155)

The capability that Hockenhull ascribes to filmic natural environments, namely to offer “suggestions” with regards to the protagonists’ metaphysical state as well as to their inner lives, sits at opposite ends from the neutrality and self-containedness that critics such as Thornham and Lawrence took notice of in Arnold’s landscapes (see fig. 21) and attempted to describe.

Pietrzak-Franger, however, makes an argument similar to Hockenhull’s in her 2012 film review for Arnold’s *Wuthering Heights* and Cary Fukunaga’s 2011 *Jane Eyre* adaptation. The essay is titled “Adapting Victorian Novels: the Poetics of Glass in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*”, in it Pietrzak-Franger lingers on the reflecting potentialities of the glassy materials displayed in both films: liminal boundaries such as window glasses, or the frozen materiality of outdoor snowflakes, iced puddles and white hoarfrost are necessarily treated as poetic signifiers, are ascribed a specific narrative role: “to

recount the major conflicts in the stories and to evince the inner struggles of both protagonists” (269). A glazed grassland is seldom allowed to exist as a space at rest, as an achromatic buffer zone, as indifferent to human troubles as it endures, unperturbed, rough weather. When Pietrzak-Franger discusses the notion that “moors feature as a condensed symbolic and material space of emotional upheaval and isolation” (269) she triggers a series of questions: is the purpose of featuring filmed/textual outdoors in fictional artworks narrative, aesthetic, or contextual? Moreover, is it possible to overcome the concept of “pathetic fallacy” when describing how natural environments are employed in cinematic and novelistic settings?



Fig. 21. Elements of visual nature and space in Andrea Arnold’s *Wuthering Heights*. Clockwise from top left: light reflections upon tree branches; a lone tree upon a hill; a pool of water against a rock; cloudy sky.

It is a well-known fact – at least to readers of the novel – that *Wuthering Heights* does not contain any scene in which Catherine and Heathcliff, or any other character, act in a

natural setting and/or explicitly address their spiritual bond with nature. Margaret Homans notably pointed out – in her 1978 essay “Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*” – the two main structural purposes of natural references in the novel, the “primal or literal, which is unseen or evaded, and the figurative, which thrives on the textual surface of the novel” (12). The figurative scenery that occasionally appears in *Wuthering Heights* is but a stylistic device, a somewhat “standard” convention that, by positing extreme conditions, creates the effect of polarity between the two houses (and their respective inhabitants). A metonymy, or even a symbol standing in between, as a way to highlight human character’s development or significance. Moreover, Homans’ argues that “Brontë finds language inadequate only for representing nature or events in nature” (11), by which she seems to suggest that the landscape is but hinted at in the narrative, taking form in readers’ minds rather than textually on the page, somehow beyond words, “unnamable” (16).

The scenographic treatment of the nature theme in *Wuthering Heights* film adaptations is paramount, a fundamental cypher second only to the tragic interpretation of the Heathcliff-Catherine love-hate relationship. The iconic panoramic view of the windswept moors, better still if peopled by one or two of the story’s gloomy protagonists, has become a crucial component of these filmed narratives. The materialization in visual, if not verbal terms, of the nature that Brontë carefully tucked behind human plots, presents some ethical challenges. Awareness of the physical presence of the camera gaze in film narratives, in fact, makes the illusion of a human-free space particularly ineffective: natural spaces within a fictional setting may be presented as though they had no witnesses, but a film production set, along with the infrastructure that allows audiences to enjoy the final work, neutralises the convention. It appears particularly difficult, therefore, to identify a middle ground between seeing the landscape as a paradoxically unfiltered, unmediated vision and a symbolic catalyst explaining human affairs. In a 2012 interview with Brandon Harris for magazine *Filmmaker*, Arnold discusses her adoption and interpretation of the 4:3 aspect ratio, which she intends as a special service to the portrayal of the person at the centre of the narrative. Besides its aesthetic values as “portrait frame” for the human subject, the effect of square ration is to add further importance to them: “It makes them really important. The landscape

doesn't take it from them. They're not small in the middle of something. It gives them real respect and importance. It's a very human frame, I think". Arnold also states that "more sky" can be contained into a square shot, and her interviewer promptly retorts that viewers "do see a lot of sky in the film". Skies and lights occupy significant visual space and (a)narrative time in Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*, as mentioned earlier in this chapter section, especially through the lens of Carson's lyrical description of analogous open environments in *The Glass Essay*. The quality of the air, as an unseeable, let alone filmable, reality, can delocalise the setting (a cloudy sky could pass as any other sky) as well as separate the "feeling" of breathing in fresh air, or cover one's cheeks from chilly breezes, from any contextual clues. When Arnold lets her cinematographer and editor linger on the way a weak ray of light makes its presence visible by means of the colour and texture of the clouds, she seems to be striving for the most elemental, the least contaminated form of panorama. Arnold's sunsets and overcast skies, therefore, are the furthest she seems to get from human-centered, narrative-grounded experiences of nature.

Moreover, a putative unspoiled landscape, such as Arnold's, appears in keeping with Timothy Morton's definition of "ecomimesis" as narrative device: "a specific rhetoric that generates a fantasy of nature as a surrounding atmosphere, palpable but shapeless" (77). Morton is famously critical of conventional "aesthetic" transmutations of natural objects in language-based texts, a process that seems to be occurring also in image-based media, such as cinema. Morton argues that the material components of natural objects – a tree, a field, a cloudy sky – are distorted into anamorphic forms when dealt with *ecologically* (63). What *ecomimesis* attempts to do, in Morton's interpretation, is to dissolve the separation between (human) subject and (natural) object, so as to provide a feel of nature as close to first-hand experience as possible. The effect the onlooker should be granted is one of total embedding in the so-called "outer world", and while Arnold's extreme close-ups mimic a total immersion, the final result Arnold may be striving for with her *Wuthering Heights* is more preoccupied with anthropic effects directing nature, rather than a fusion with the non-human. While, on the one hand, Arnold may appear perfectly aligned with conventional prettified outdoor visions, on the other hand her reified vision of nature does not seem to hide the mediating and filtering

action the filmic medium entails. While Arnold's critical approach to landscape and the ways it is conventionally portrayed employs, at times, the visual and narrative vocabulary of nature documentaries, her attempt to show land as workplace – thus imbricating nature with human labour – makes the hierarchical, anthropocentric conception of nature visible. It is interesting to compare Arnold's demystifying method with a stance that seeks opposite aims, such as an amateur, or fan-reader's tendency to aestheticise specific places by means of their correlation to human-made actions, or rather to a specific human.

Critic Margaret Homans already pointed out the degrees of subjectivity embedded in the treatment of the "natural" theme in *Wuthering Heights* in her 1978 paper "Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*". On the one hand, Homans tends to sublimate the idea of "nature" that Emily Brontë, as a person rather than as an author, may have developed with the notion and use of "natural objects" in her writings. The boundary between the authorial biography and authorial fictional production is a very permeable one: Homans goes as far as imagining (by means of an attempt at para-psychoanalysis) that Brontë could not find the proper language to describe nature, and therefore needed to sublimate its role and presence in order to be able to write it *in* the novel. Homans does, however, anticipate some of the thoughts that Timothy Morton later organized in *Ecology without Nature* (2007). Homans' arguments about the instrumental use of natural tropes in the written narrative – as "adjective or pronoun" attached to the noun/character (Homans 12) – seems confirmed in film adaptations, where natural settings may take centre stage, but primarily as correlatives to the emotional journeys that characters are undergoing. Homans ascribes to the adjectival uses of nature in the book (12) a clarifying and guiding function for readers:

Nature as a figure comes subservient to whatever it is used to describe, dropping from the primacy of the unnamed to what might be described as a tertiary status, since it is named not for its own sake but for the sake of something else. This could be called nature as adjective or pronoun, where the place of the noun in such a syntactic model is occupied by the characters who are generally the objects of such figurative descriptions. (Homans 12)

Likewise, the popular idea that *Wuthering Heights* is an outdoor novel, the key role attached to the protagonists' free roaming on the moor in film adaptations are (visual and cultural) tools that facilitate the comprehension of the narrative (hence, its consumption and transmission) through the dichotomic systematization of outdoor/indoor spaces, the Heights and the Grange, Catherine and Heathcliff, good and evil.

A characteristic figurative use of nature, often cited as evidence for the presence of "real" nature in the novel, is the device of employing a natural object as a metaphor for character, almost with the force of a metonymy or a symbol, in that frequently the natural object substitutes syntactically for the person described. (Homans 12)

Homans' conclusion is that "Primal nature remains submerged" (13), and that what little comes across from background to foreground does so only in specific conjunction (symbolic or metonymic rather than figurative or incidental) with human actors: it becomes a carrier of subjectivity, not for itself, but for the human character situated in its proximity. Morton addresses a similar vehicular capability in natural objects with his discussion, in *Ecology without Nature*, of "re-mark": the quasi-imperceptible feature that signals something worth noticing out of an undifferentiated backdrop, drawing out, in short, a subject out of an object. It is not in the descriptive "quality" of communicative forms that Morton locates the re-mark, rather, he claims: "To identify the re-mark is to answer the question: how little does the text need to differentiate between foreground and background, or between space and place?" (49). Using this framework, references to tree foliage, the condition of the roads, the colour of the sky appear as ways to draw attention towards character-based incidents, a gesture indicating the right direction to viewers. The time of the year affects morale and mood, the possibility to get out and reach the neighbours' house or the moor top. How light falls can heighten a sad character's grumpy face: focus is redirected towards human action and feeling, specifically as experienced by human agents with a name, whose shape is neatly cut off from a beautiful, yet fuzzy and undefined backdrop.

I doubt that any of the *Wuthering Heights* adaptations – whether narrative or documentary in their scope – fully succeed in tackling the ecosphere in terms that are

not human-centred. While advocating on behalf of natural conservation is clearly not a priority for TV entertainment or heritage documentaries, Arnold's eco-conscious film still reiterates conventional visual and narrative approaches to nature. Willoquet-Maricondi argues that true ecocentric cinema operates a paradigmatic shift insofar as it suggests re-focusing on subjects other than humans, through a vocabulary that eschews anthropocentric stances (45). Can nature on display as a narrative trope comply with the requisite "engagement" in active ecological policies? Or is it rather a shareable cipher for the anxiety and impotence facing climate emergency? When Arnold puts the human back into nature, she makes their interconnectedness apparent by portraying labour as a force that effectively shapes landscapes. Arnold's biomorphic visions are, therefore, imbricated into an anthropocentric system, indeed a repurposing of earlier sources, one that is unlikely to suggest a pre-mythical past, something that could have happened before the novel itself. Acknowledging cinema as mere representation, and spectatorship as mere perception imposes a reduction of one's positioning: film eludes direct engagement, and diverts first-hand experience. Scott MacDonald argues that ecocinema evokes "the experience of being immersed in the natural world," it thereby creates "the illusion of preserving 'Nature'" (108). An illusion that is not devoid of political depth, since, as MacDonald contends, what ecocinema also causes is "a retraining of perception, as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship" (109). The ecological audience, as well as the ecological readership, therefore, needs to find a way to come to terms with how corrosive their gaze, and curiosity, still can be. A stance that would prove perfectly faithful to *Wuthering Heights'* material, rather than metaphysical, approach to landscape, its ownership and its fruition, what it means to live on the land, surviving through and profiting from it, as well as watching it on screen.

Therefore, with her period-piece adaptation Arnold is, arguably, simultaneously reifying nature, albeit in a dark and dirty image, and promoting an aesthetic, instinctive approach to thinking about nature critically. In the same 2012 *Filmmaker* magazine interview with Brandon Harris mentioned earlier, Arnold recalls the backstage decisions that influenced the entire film production. "I joined this film when it already had some momentum" Arnold reveals, "it was already in development": the *Wuthering Heights*

adaptation she came to direct, therefore, came to her not as an original idea, but rather as a half-formed project, already provided with a script, a cast and a production team who, one can imagine, needed to complete the project in due time. Despite the freedom granted to Arnold, such as the possibility to radically revise the script, she comments that:

By the time I started again, there was this momentum to make the film fast. I partly believe in working fast because I think when you work fast you make instinctive decisions and I find that those decisions are often better than the ones you think about too much. I try to retain an instinctive element to what I do as a filmmaker, even though it's one of the least instinctive mediums that there is because everything takes so long [...].

The inclusion of ideas regarding “instinct” and fast, spontaneous decisions discloses a pivotal tendency in Arnold’s philosophy, a formal habitus that can, in some specific instances, subtend a series of cinematographic meanings that are larger than the obvious concerns the film explicitly addresses. Given that the industrial film complex in operation behind such large-scale works can only tolerate a reduced amount of unscheduled, unmeditated decisions in order not to disrupt the film production, the fact that Arnold’s adaptation features a large number of animal actors and extras, testifies to the necessary presence of a regulating force equal, if not greater, than Arnold’s love for quick, spontaneous choices.

British legislation provides for considerate employment of animals in film through the 1937 Cinematograph Films (Animals) Act, which makes it an offence to distribute or exhibit a film whose creation involved actual cruelty to an animal. The introductory clause states:

No person shall exhibit to the public, or supply to any person for public exhibition (whether by him or by another person), any cinematograph film (whether produced in Great Britain or elsewhere) if in connection with the production of the film any scene

represented in the film was organised or directed in such a way as to involve the cruel infliction of pain or terror on any animal or the cruel goading of any animal to fury.⁸³

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), the agency responsible for classifying and censoring film material set for release in the UK, operates within such legal parameters. The provisions described in the Act, however, do not prescribe supervision and/or standardized practices towards animals employed in film production. The Act only concerns the distribution and availability of film products already assembled, and targets specifically the instances of violence that appear to have been inflicted gratuitously, and purely as a form of spectacle or entertainment in front of the camera. Violence that would have happened regardless, such as butchering captured in a documentary film, for instance, would be exempt from the ban.⁸⁴ Audiences watching any film product in a legal venue or format within the UK can, therefore, rest assured that the animal suffering portrayed on screen is an act, as fictional as any other performance. Untrained animals on screen tend to eschew the status of “subject” that personified, trained animal actors enjoy: they do not mimic anthropic gestures and expressions, therefore they are unable to directly inspire empathy on a peer-to-peer level with onlookers. An animal that is just “itself” on screen is, customarily, a free-roaming wild creature or a tamed body behind cages, often a subjugated body living a domesticated life. Either way, it is a key unit within a relationship of aggressive violence: its unpredictable behaviour is potentially violent towards humans, or, conversely, the animal itself is fully vulnerable to potential (or programmatic) human violence. Either way, an animal body on screen is reinstated as alive and visible, whereas human everyday life obliterates and forgets the vision of real, living animals other than pets. Jonathan Burts notes, in *Animals in Film* (2002), that “the animal image

⁸³ The full text of the Cinematograph Films (Animals) Act 1937 (1 Edw. 8 & 1 Geo. 6, c. 59) was retrieved online from the UK Public General Acts directory, provided by the National Archives at www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Edw8and1Geo6/1/59/contents. Accessed 11 February 2021.

⁸⁴ Michael Brooke’s short interpretation of the legislative text for the BFI’s *Screen* online repository highlights such loopholes and lists a brief history of films that incurred in the ban and/or censorship for their display of unnecessary animal distress.

constantly points beyond itself" (12): not only is the animal on screen the interpreter of its own agency, but also of the "fictional" agency that film-making humans decide to place on and extract from its outward behaviour. Moreover, Burt argues, animals as signs bear specific connotations that influence the meaning of their presence in relation to cultural and historical notions of what that specific animal does or represents: "to examine the visual construction of animals in film is to consider the animal as a visual image in a network of cultural and social associations" (39). Burt convenes that this stratification of agency and connotations "constantly erodes the boundary between fiction and reality" (30): audiences may choose to willingly suspend their disbelief, but they would not be able to deny that the concept of performance is alien to the animal-actor. Whatever response or action the animal expresses on film, it truly felt it. This may, obviously, generate concerns for animal welfare, especially when pain, violence and death are implied diegetically: animals cannot feign their passing. The publicly available BBFC report on Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* states that the "work was passed uncut"⁸⁵ and signals the ratings with regards to strong language, discrimination and disturbing images. Swear words and racist slurs are indeed present, albeit justified contextually, and the images deemed "disturbing" are thus described:

There are four scenes involving live animals, with a sheep's throat being cut, a rabbit's neck being broken and two dogs seen hanging from their collars from a fence and a branch, implying that they are left to die. Assurances have been provided by the production company explaining in detail how these scenes were filmed, including detail of special effects employed, so as not to harm any of the animals involved.

Audiences cannot but take the BBFC approval at face value, trusting that the sheep, rabbit and puppies went on to live peaceful lives despite the instants of fear and intimidation they were subjected to during the shooting of the film.

Despite the "disturbing" rating that Arnold scored, her employment and use of animals in *Wuthering Heights* is not straightforwardly objectifying. At any rate, she does not seem to fetishise them as much as she does with her landscapes. Indeed, she uses animal

⁸⁵ Retrieved online at www.bbfc.co.uk/release/wuthering-heights-2011-q29sbgvjdglybjpwwc0znzc5otu. Accessed 11 February 2021.

actors and extras sparingly. Cattle – predominantly cows, sheep and horses – has little to no “active” role, the milking that Brontë often names as the paramount farm activity at the Heights is replaced with the exploration of human labour I described earlier. Game and wildfowl, on the other hand, gain centre-stage in Arnold’s narrative. Brontë’s descriptive sentences, such as “garments befitting [Hareton’s] daily occupations of working on the farm and lounging among the moors after rabbits and game” (Brontë 196), hint at her use of animals as abstract referent, rather than as factual presence, but Arnold goes as far as assembling a hypothetical hunting session that a Heights inhabitant could have performed on a regular basis. Arnold films her rabbit with its leg stuck in a trap, the string firmly coiled around its leg. She then portrays Heathcliff carrying a bunch of hare carcasses on its back, and later flinging them on a hard surface once he has returned to the Heights: the close-up on their glossy eyeballs highlights the unfeigned sign of post mortem status. In their essay “Being Struck: On the Force of Slaughter and Cinematic Affect” Shukin and O’Brien formulate an affective understanding of the cinematic experience by aligning Foucauldian biopower – “the right to take life to let live” – with filmic technique, arguing that cinema’s power is virtually carried out in its capacity to make watchers *feel*. This idea becomes apparent, both metaphorically and literally, when violence against animals is depicted on screen. For instance, the act of “striking” in cinema becomes, simultaneously, the fictional violent blow that hurts or kills the animal subject, and the physical reaction that the watcher’s body feels, in differing degrees of intensity, when exposed to filmed violence. It is not my intention (nor role) to investigate the liability of Arnold and her producers’ tactics with regards to animal welfare, but I am, nevertheless, concerned with the filmic effects they achieved, and what their consequences are within the greater narrative (see fig. 22).



Fig. 22. Clockwise from top left: a rotting fruit; Heathcliff walks towards the Heights carrying the rabbits he has captured and killed; three dead rabbits inside the Heights; Heathcliff's horse grazes on the moor.

Anat Pick's reflections on post-human sensitivity in *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (2011) adopt an equalising framework which does not recognise identity-based distinctions. Still, its "creaturely" streak is as material as bodies, and it appoints equal sacredness and vulnerability to singular entities. Pick, therefore, attempts to rethink subjectivities through values and features that elude the conventional "human" traits such as language, consciousness, rationality, dignity. Rather, Pick thinks about subjectivity as shared among different embodiments, the experience of reality as mediated through bodies, of any shape and size. Pick's deeply anti-speciesist approach to film analysis draws from the philosophical poetics of Simone Weil: the idea of vulnerability needs to be reintroduced as an ethical as well as an aesthetic mark in systematic analysis (3). Pick's starting grounds for her argument fully

acknowledge the post-human dimension as a philosophical given rather than as a threat to “human condition” or “human subjectivity” (2-4), while her discussion aims at a “contraction” (6), it seeks to “explore the regions deemed animal (even vegetative) that lurk within human itself” (6). Human subjectivity needs to make itself smaller in order to broaden the reach of animal, vegetal (and perhaps non-organic?) forms of being. On the other end of “dehumanisation” – the well-proven strategy that annihilates agency and will by stripping the individual of its “human” traits, such as language, history, community – could be, Picks hopes, another positive form of dehumanisation, one that does not need a central, embodied position to establish its identity and power. The notion of vulnerability, however, is paramount in Pick’s treatment of animal existence in relation to humans: to recognise its uneven position with regards to human-made violence, and much akin to Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” and Simone Weil’s “pitiless necessity” which, however, are distinct from victimising stances that evoke attentiveness as a reaction to shock-value, visible pain alone (15-6). In *Wuthering Heights* the animal does not appear as a companion, while being nonetheless committed to a non-verbal dialogue with human characters, diegetically, and the human gaze, extra-diegetically. The animal is visualised through a blend of the scopophilic and the ethnographic gaze. While Arnold’s lushious, haptic close-ups grant visual pleasure, they also bare the film production infrastructure: on the one hand the zoo-like, existence-as-performance of the animal actors involved is made visible, on the other, the zoo gaze⁸⁶ is automatically absorbed as a conventional practice in spectatorship. However, the fictional existence of Arnold’s sheep, rabbits and horses is not up for scrutiny, entertainment or pleasure, the animal behaviour transposed on the screen seems to retrace a form of agency exceeding its anthropomorphic sense. The animal exists within a network of sense and genealogy of references that come attached to specific species, but serve no purpose in explaining the single animal’s behaviour: the narrative filter does not extrapolate

⁸⁶ Catherine Russell coined the term “zoo gaze” in her study *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (1999). Russell posits the zoo as a “technology of vision” (123), a conceptual and physical stance that identifies a number of species as “other” and proceeds to frame them accordingly, keeping them close enough to watch them, but far enough to ensure one’s safety. The visual spectacle imbricated in this hierarchical relationship can be experienced, therefore, through a mixture of the pornographic and the ethnographic gaze: the first ensuring pleasure, the second satisfying curiosity (127).

anything from the animal other than its corporeal presence on screen. Cows and horses appear as cattle, elements in the farm's productive routine, a little more that fixtures in the landscape: they connote the space, but do not constitute an active role within it. If there is little proof of Arnold's wish to project the animal's personality or viewpoint, the novel, likewise, does not seem to call in any similar desire. While Arnold's rejection of voyeurism as a form of power over other beings is ambiguous – ease with the aesthetic pleasure involved in the observation of animals, especially “nice” animals, is at times challenged, at times pursued – a “zoologist gaze” of sorts is transposed from the page to the screen.

Brontë's fascination with naturalistic observation is well-documented, her life drawings of animals archived at Brontë Parsonage enjoy (despite copyright restrictions) a certain popularity. Her 1841 watercolour titled *Nero, body of a merlin* portrays a detailed, yet weirdly cutified profile of a captive merlin rescued from the moor: the nickname attached to the animal does not quite succeed in taming it as its docile pose and enormous, cartoonish damp eye can.⁸⁷ Arnold seems to adopt Brontë's ornithologist's perspective – or rather, taxidermist's – in her employment of bird's feathers: in Arnold they form a collection, which Catherine stores in a pillowcase and shows Heathcliff as a way to teach him the name of the birds in one of the most successful bonding moments between the two. In the scene, Catherine arranges the feathers carefully, pronounces each bird's name and encourages Heathcliff to practice by repeating after her, she then

⁸⁷ Nero the pet merlin became the subject of a short documentary commissioned to land artist Kate Whiteford by the Brontë Parsonage Museum to commemorate the Emily Brontë bicentenary in 2018. *Wings of Desire* imagines Nero's bird's eye view of the Yorkshire moors which it, supposedly, shared with its owner. The statement published by the Museum encourages engagement with Whiteford's artwork as a mediated experience through metaphor, and highlights the relevance of the individual bird through its relationship with the human, rather than as an inhabitant of the landscape. By suggesting that the video artwork is “[...] focused on Emily's relationship with her hawk, the bird becoming a metaphor for the themes of escape, predation, flight and cruelty, as well as the longing for liberty that exists in Emily's writing”, the artist and the commissioning body implicate the author and the animal in a quasi-interchangeable relationship. The act of watching – presumably within the museum context – allows the audience to become the hawk, and therefore become, through metonymia and explicative materials, Emily Brontë herself (“*Wings of Desire* by Kate Whiteford. A New Exhibition to Mark Emily's Bicentenary”).

strokes the feathers gently against each of their faces. Catherine's listing of birds' names, however, is extrapolated from a later passage in the novel – when Catherine has already become Mrs Linton – and the display of feathers is a casual selection from the stuffing of a cushion that Catherine has tore open with her teeth:

A minute previously she was violent; now, supported on one arm, and not noticing my refusal to obey her, she seemed to find childish diversion in pulling the feathers from the rents she had just made, and ranging them on the sheet according to their different species: her mind had strayed to other associations. 'That's a turkey's,' she murmured to herself; 'and this is a wild duck's; and this is a pigeon's. Ah, they put pigeons' feathers in the pillows – no wonder I couldn't die! Let me take care to throw it on the floor when I lie down. And here is a moor-cock's; and this – I should know it among a thousand – it's a lapwing's. Bonny bird; wheeling over our heads in the middle of the moor. It wanted to get to its nest, for the clouds had touched the swells, and it felt rain coming. This feather was picked up from the heath, the bird was not shot: we saw its nest in the winter, full of little skeletons. Heathcliff set a trap over it, and the old ones dared not come. I made him promise he'd never shoot a lapwing after that, and he didn't. Yes, here are more! Did he shoot my lapwings, Nelly? Are they red, any of them? Let me look.' (Brontë, 122-3)

In both narratives the ornithological specimens appear to sublimate the experience of the unregulated outside that Catherine and Heathcliff share. The perspective, however, is reversed: when Brontë posits nature as a lost site of communion, Arnold crafts a projection of potential future meaning (see fig. 23). And if the subjugation of wild animals seems to come through, primarily, as a form of linguistic and metaphorical bending and reshaping, house pets do not appear any safer from analogous exertions of human power. While domestic life and endearment may shield them from premeditated, brutal killing, dogs (of any shape and size) are not safe from physical and, presumably, emotional harm.



Fig. 23. Nature as part of the Grange/Heights dichotomy. Clockwise from top left: a crystal lamp reflects the light as the Grange; adult Catherine serves tea at the Grange, a rainbow hits her hand and china cup; young Catherine shows her bird feathers collection; young Catherine and Heathcliff walk back to the Heights.

As Barbara Munson Goff wonders in her 1984 essay “Between Natural Theology and Natural Selection: Breeding the Human Animal in ‘Wuthering Heights’”,⁸⁸ it can be tricky

⁸⁸ Barbara Munson Goff’s argument is built on a parallel comparison between Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Charles Darwin’s 1859 treatise *On the Origin of Species*. On this methodological/literary basis, Munson Goff also bases a comparison between formal and latent breeding techniques, for both animals and humans, as quasi-eugenic forms of “natural evolution”: “*Wuthering Heights* is about the colossal stupidity, arrogance, even impiety of anthropocentrism. So, also, is Darwin’s *Origin of Species* [...]” (506). Darwin and Brontë, in Munson Goff’s reading, provide similar ideas of “natural evolution”, as an upward advance through selection, according to Darwin, and as a downward slide despite selection, in Brontë’s text. Munson Goff’s overview presents compelling ideas about Brontë’s literary intentions and the

to distinguish the submission of animals occurring at the Heights from what is perceived as the norm at the Grange: is the Heights really the crueller of the two houses? Munson Goff points out that “People for whom animals are an economic system [...] do not sentimentalize or anthropomorphize them” (498). The speciesism that ostensibly warrants stockbreeding and hunting at the Heights is, nonetheless, equally active in the elegantly-lit Grange drawing room. The first appearance of the Linton siblings, Munson Goff notes, is conjured by Heathcliff’s words as told by Nelly Dean, and has Edgar and Isabella quarrelling for their new puppy, which they have just violently pulled between one another, and possibly came close to injure:

And now, guess what your good children were doing? Isabella – I believe she is eleven, a year younger than Cathy – lay screaming at the farther end of the room, shrieking as if witches were running red-hot needles into her. Edgar stood on the hearth weeping silently, and in the middle of the table sat a little dog, shaking its paw and yelping; which, from their mutual accusations, we understood they had nearly pulled in two between them. The idiots! That was their pleasure! to quarrel who should hold a heap of warm

overarching theoretical claim she aimed at with her novel, but in doing so she unfortunately does not seem to want to strip away from discussing biographical and apocryphal information about the author.

Munson Goff usefully points out that Brontë’s interest and knowledge in country husbandry techniques, animal breeding and empirical notions of natural history (including zoology and botany) could, indeed, be a useful undertow to the appraisal of her narratives. She does not, however, refrain from signalling Brontë’s supposed “paganism” as the determining factor behind *Wuthering Heights*’ theological architecture, while highlighting her “misanthropic”, “hermitic” character might suggest a somewhat indelicate scrutiny of Brontë’s private life, and possibly a distrust in her speculative capabilities (482).

As Munson Goff describes it, Brontë’s natural theology seems to admit a “design” inherent to creation, but also, somewhat eerily, appears to accept its embedded cruelty, pain and imbalance of power: “And for both Darwin and Brontë, unnecessary cruelty was the distinct feature of human behavior. In nature destruction on a massive scale are necessary for the proliferation of life and variety” (495). In fact, Goff eventually manages to embed the novel’s pessimistic streak – the sense of doom traceable in its characters’ conviction that no solutions or ameliorative attempts are feasible – with Brontë’s alleged theory of “devolution”: “*Wuthering Heights* is indeed a ‘retro- spective reconstruction’ of how humankind got into this sorry state, suggesting that the species has been weakened by poor breeding methods, hyperdomestication, and the hyper-‘adaptation of external nature’ to humanity’s fallen nature.” (494).

hair, and each begin to cry because both, after struggling to get it, refused to take it.
(Brontë 48)

Arnold indulges in such moments of careless human abuse at the expense of smaller creatures, and grants screen time to further episodes of violence against dogs. While the acts specifically against dogs are not inherently more vicious than the cattle breeding, the trap-laying and the feather-plucking, the power imbalance that Arnold lays bare is more likely to strike audiences as a gratuitous exercise of cruelty, an indication of moral underdevelopment or malicious conduct. Dogs are hung twice in the novel, as in Arnold's adaptation. In the first instance, Nelly rescues Isabella's spaniel dog during a night walk:

My surprise and perplexity were great on discovering, by touch more than vision, Miss Isabella's springer, Fanny, suspended by a handkerchief, and nearly at its last gasp. I quickly released the animal, and lifted it into the garden. I had seen it follow its mistress up-stairs when she went to bed; and wondered much how it could have got out there, and what mischievous person had treated it so. (Brontë 129)

The incident, Munson Goff insightfully argues, is reminiscent of the childhood fight scene among the Linton siblings, and an indication that Heathcliff references it, "[...] for he pointedly attempts to finish off the job of murder when he elopes with Isabella" (498). The underside to Nelly's constant presence and surveillance is, in fact, Isabella's unresolved push-and-pull between the two houses: it during her final flight from the domestic abuse she has suffered at the hand of her husband Heathcliff at the Heights that the completing fragment of canine exploitation is presented, one that naturalises violence as structural feature of the Heights, made obvious by the child (Hareton) unmerciful behaviour (one that looks ostensibly gratuitous because it comes devoid of framing context).

In my flight through the kitchen I bid Joseph speed to his master; I knocked over Hareton, who was hanging a litter of puppies from a chair-back in the doorway; and, blessed as a soul escaped from purgatory, I bounded, leaped, and flew down the steep

road; then, quitting its windings, shot direct across the moor, rolling over banks, and wading through marshes: precipitating myself, in fact, towards the beacon-light of the Grange. (Brontë 183)

Arnold's employment of animal life – specifically the narrativization of their agency in order to control their suffering for visual effects – sits ambiguously within her distinct interest for detail and ephemerality. Considering that Arnold's cinema seems not as concerned with characters' dramatic arc than with their specifics, such as where they spend their time, and the look of the space they happen to be in, the ephemerality that interests Arnold and that informs her visual style risks becoming an objectifying force over animals on screen. If Hareton hanging puppies becomes a connotative spacial statement – the Heights are a brutal place – and the Linton siblings quarrelling for full ownership of the family pet comes to signify analogous forms of acceptable brutality (albeit set in a well furnished environment), animals are therefore reinstated as corollary (often subjected) beings to their human counterparts. Audiences' affective sympathy is likely achieved by means of their detailed screen presence. The affective hint, however, is a subtle one, which Arnold seems to achieve by a mere supplement of seconds, as she lets her camera linger just a moment longer on the dog, hare, horse's body. The double role animals play in Arnold's cinematic universe can at times border fetishisation and objectification, but the duration of her extreme close-ups demands from viewers a kind of attention that goes beyond scopophilia. Animal beings, whether human or non-human, Arnold seems to posit filmically, gain centre stage depending on the perspective at play: time granted to single subjects highlights the simultaneous interdependence and parallel existence of so many of them. This state of co-existence and capillary presence seems corroborated by Arnold's use (or rather, disuse) of soundtrack. Arnold creates a filmic experience devoid of extradiegetic musical soundtrack: dogs yapping, horses braying and wind howling fill in the soundscape along with diegetic human-made noises and tunes. Young Cathy sings traditional Scottish ballad "Barbara Allen", Nelly hums while she is working, the band comes playing around

the farm, people talk and shout to one another. Music is popular, minimal,⁸⁹ and human voices seem equal to the sounds of other animals, only perfectly intelligible by a human audience.

Markers of Britishness are paramount in Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*: positive connotation of Yorkshire countryside as an unblemished natural landscape, however, come accompanied by, for instance, idiosyncratic reminders of the imperial enterprise and its consequences on people. Moreover, the focus on natural elements rather than plot and/or character development is treated according to Arnold's characteristic inclination towards haptic visuals and a-narrative, para-narrative shots. The result is a composite union of natural, wild and anthropized environments that superficially seems to tune down human presence, for instance by embedding humans in big open spaces, or by extrapolating "wildlife documentary"-style snapshots from the narrative line. The overall effect, however, is layered, and somewhat ambiguous. Arnold tactically exposes the human labour and shaping force behind the certain look of the landscape, thus centering the rural, farming context of *Wuthering Heights* and elevates the labour-conscious side of the plotline by positioning on an adjacent level to the miserable love story the novel (faintly) details. Arnold's strategy seems to cause a two-fold set of consequences: the inevitable anthropocentric perspective of the storytelling might fetishise the animals, plants and open spaces that Arnold lovingly portrays. The same anthropocentric gaze and stance, on the other hand, discloses itself as the conventional, naturalized mode of fruition that demeans non-human beings to ancillary, metaphorical roles that connote their human counterparts. Arnold manages to imbue her preoccupation with unspoiled natural scenery with both traditional tropes of aestheticised landscape representation, and with awareness of the unpretty, often unpleasant lack of boundaries between the human gaze and the human body living on earth. The ecological streak evident in Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* adaptation is at once

⁸⁹ The film ending and credits are accompanied by the only example of a "regular" soundtrack: a bespoke track by American pop-folk ensemble Mumford & Sons, titled "The Enemy". The anachronism of the country pop tune that closes the film, however, merely signals that the making of the film is contemporaneous. It nonetheless seems to validate the customary understanding of *Wuthering Heights* as an ill-fated teenage love story.

geographically localised and generic, a potential subtext that eco-conscious viewers might decide to pick up. The next section will develop further the local/global appeal and potentialities in *Wuthering Heights* by means of an overview of filmic adaptations that exported ideas of British natural scenery to either adapt them for home markets and cultural specificities, or craft their own imaginary version of what wild Yorkshire moors look like.

3.4. World Moors

The consistent resort to film adaptations from Brontë's only novel throughout the twentieth century is not a phenomenon restricted to the Anglosphere. Instances of cross-national and cross-cultural adaptations emerge in countries as diverse as, for instance, Turkey (*Ölmeyen Ask*, directed by Metin Erksan in 1966); India (*Dil Diya Dard Liya* is a Hindi romance directed in 1966 by Abdur Rashid Kardar and Dilip Kumar); the Philippines (*Hihintayin Kita sa Langit*, directed by Carlos Siguion-Reyna in 1991, and its 2007 remake, *Ang Pangako*, directed by Mike Tuviera). This final chapter section, however, will restrict its analysis on Jacques Rivette's 1985 French adaptation *Hurlevent*, Yoshida Yoshishige's 1988 Japanese reimagining *Onimaru - Arashi Ga Oka*, and Luis Buñuel's 1954 Mexican melodrama *Abismos de pasión*, given their wider popularity and availability. While many of the aforementioned world adaptations situate their matrix in William Wyler's 1939 classic Hollywood romance *Wuthering Heights*, they also respond to the ur-adaptation by deploying site-specific devices that successfully translate the plotline into locally situated stories, each showcasing national, linguistic and cultural distinctness. This is the case, for example, of the imaginary Yorkshire in two Italian TV adaptations, where landscape is treated, alternatively, as foreground, middle ground, background, horizon: it seems to work as a general signifier, rather than a souvenir or a tracking device. A 2004 *Wuthering Heights* adaptation by the Italian public broadcasting service RAI, *Cime tempestose*, fully embraces the "heritage" streak that characterised period pieces produced in the UK and US throughout the 80's and 90's, and duly imported in Italy. The Heights and the Grange, for instance, are both rendered as great, somewhat "gothic" mansions.



Fig. 24. Shots from the opening sequence of RAI TV adaptation *Cime tempestose*: from the top down, the title in elegant cursive scripts set against a wintery landscape of fir trees; the Heights farmhouse covered in snow; actors Alessio Boni (Heathcliff) and Anita Caprioli (Catherine) walk hand in hand in the snowy outdoors.

The outside/inside boundary is very neat: indoors are cosy, spacious, well-lit despite the few visible candles, and well-ranged despite the thick cobwebs piling in every corner. The outdoors, conversely, are a blurry white space, perpetually snowed in. Whiteness does not so much blind as it suffocates, making the open space look stuffy and small. Snow makes nature indistinct, a mere backdrop, not even a localisable landscape (see fig. 24). A 2004 newspaper review by Alessandra Vitali mentions the on-location shooting time as “ten weeks in Czech Republic (and Cornwall), in extreme conditions, the set was at two thousand metres of altitude, temperature 25 degrees below zero”. Location scouting, therefore, is only partly seeking for authenticity (on its British side),

and apparently more concerned with casting persistent snowy weather as the extreme hardship. To a Mediterranean audience – or least one that is arguably less acquainted with below zero temperatures, and more responsive to thick forests than to hilly moors – the resulting perennial winterland echoes a fairy-tale setting, and an enchanted storytelling mode. An earlier RAI adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* was made in 1956: at that time the newly founded network only operated a single channel, the “Programma nazionale”, and *Cime tempestose* was the third TV film (or, as it was called at the time, a “telenovel”) ever to be aired. Precise localisation is almost completely unimportant to this specific adaptation, directed by Mario Landi, which was almost fully filmed in studio. Perhaps its most original insertion is an attempt to translate the open view of the moors with a geographical analogy that Italian audiences would be more likely to recognise. A scene narrated in hindsight by Heathcliff shows the children playing alone on a deserted beach, the wavy sea acting as the correlative to the familiar, yet not fully knowable, experience of the open natural spaces as vegetable earthiness (see fig. 25). The American influence, in the guise of Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights*, is arguably detectable in the romance elements shared by other subsequent adaptations. The elision of the latter part of the novels, which factually erases the intergenerational cycle of hereditariness and atonement planned by Brontë, in addition to the softening treatment of Heathcliff as a love-stricken surly man rather than as sinister manipulator, are features likely established by the Hollywood production which then percolated into the popular conceptions of the work. In his essay “European Conflict in Hollywood’s Reconstruction of English Fiction” (1996), Robert Lawson-Peebles argues that Wyler’s film “[...] is an engaged text which maps American ideology onto the Yorkshire moors” (9).



Fig. 25. *Childhood beach scene in the 1956 Cime tempestose production for TV: child actors Paolo Foti: (Heathcliff) and Ludovica Modugno (Catherine) run on the seashore as the camera slowly zooms out to include the entire marine landscape into the frame.*

Lawson-Peebles describes how Lawrence Olivier's Heathcliff is cast as a watered-down version of Brontë's Byronic hero so as to fit into Hollywood narrative conventions – “the stable boy and the lady” love plot (6) – along with the manipulation of the “pastoral framing device” (6) which, in the source book, reflects and comments on the characters' arch by way of the weather and the varying pleasantness of the outdoors. “Democracy and love” (1) are the social and ideological purposes embedded in Wyler's adaptation, Lawson-Peebles argues: an attempt to subdue the original class-oriented power struggles that concerned Brontë is performed in order to prove the ongoing relevance of classic British texts to interwar American audiences at a time of international diplomatic tension. Moreover, interventions on the plotline could allegedly serve to boost

recognizable American values – egalitarianism, the appropriateness of migration, devotion to a fairy tale-like rags-to-riches parable, children’s supposed innocence as a vessel for wisdom and truth, fascination of “new worlds” secluded from “old world” decadence (7) – while framing them within a distinctly British context, suggesting the idea of their historicity and, consequently, fostering a sense of kinship and dependency between the two cultures. The fact, however, that Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights* “also creates a geographical polarity somewhat different from that of the novel” (Lawson-Peebles 7) is crucial to explain the ensuing treatment of the nature theme in later cross-national adaptations. As Lawson-Peebles stresses, the novel does not outstretch its locale to include the outdoor moors and fields as anything more than purchasable and inheritable assets, its focus is on the contrast between the two houses, the Heights and the Grange, as instrumental to the class divide that compromises social cohabitation. Wyler’s film, on the other hand, posits Penistone Crag as the opposite element to both residences, as a the foremost locus of natural wildness, “[...] employing the pastoral as a thematic rather than a framing device” (Lawson-Peebles 7), it becomes a visual cypher for the freeing and generative potential for the characters that has come to be associated with the open in *Wuthering Heights*.

It is interesting, therefore, to find out that Wyler’s influence is not paramount, and did not subsist unchallenged. For instance, Yoshida Yoshishige, the director of Japanese adaptation *Onimaru*, declared in an interview with Brigitte Baudin for French newspaper *Le Figaro* (october 1988) that he had first encountered Brontë’s novel via Georges Bataille eponymous monographic essay collected in *La littérature et le mal* (“Literature and evil” 1957) and, moreover, that he deemed Wyler’s well-known “ballroom” adaptation too sentimental (qtd. in Seijo Richart 58). The celebrated literary essay about the brief life and only work by Emily Brontë is part of a collection of monographic texts which Bataille had published individually in the magazine review he directed, *Critique*, from 1946 onwards. *Literature and Evil* argues for the inseparability of literature and human evil, that is, literary accounts demonstrably attain their purest function when they display and illustrate the pernicious and the detrimental in human nature, not when they attempt to advance a moral stance. An author’s distancing from or dismissal of evil in their work, therefore, signals artistic failure: the communication of knowledge at the

heart of the literary effort needs to channel through the writer's awareness of their own complicity with the evil of human nature. Bataille reads *Wuthering Heights* as a revolt narrative about Heathcliff's furious response to his life context: his exclusion from the only social realm he has come to know results in his overwhelming reaction, one of vengeance and indifference to the pain of others. Bataille also reveals that "The subject of the novel is the tragic violation of the law" (21), yet Brontë's vision is essentially oneiric, rather than logical, in her treatment of Heathcliff. His *raison d'être* is primordial, clear-cut in its relentless pursuit of vengeance, much like:

[...] That of the child in revolt against the world of Good, against the adult world, and committed, in his revolt, to the side of Evil. In this revolt there is no law which Heathcliff does not enjoy breaking. (Bataille 20)

The disclosure of evil that Brontë's novel operates is also able to uphold Bataille's principle that literature should not be called upon performing the task to rearrange the collectivity, on the contrary, its only purpose should be to support full communication with the reader. Moreover, Bataille praises the novel's crucial tension that connects atonement with transgression, death and crushing pain with the clarity provided, eventually, with their direct confrontation:

In so far as violence casts its shadow on the being and he sees death 'face to face', life is purely beneficial. Nothing can destroy it. Death is the condition of its renewal" (28).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Yoshida's Japanese adaptation attempts to translate the novel's slow-fulfilling circularity, as described by Bataille, by stretching the adaptation so as to include the intergenerational turnover in its entirety, thus completing the process of atonement narrated by Brontë which Bataille – here a source in his own right – clearly praises as a successful confrontation with human evil.



Fig. 26. Shots from the closing sequence in *Onimaru - Arashi Ga Oka* (1988) directed by Yoshida Yoshishige. From top left: Onimaru is fatally wounded during a sword fight against Yoshimaru; young Kinu and Yoshimaru discuss their newfound freedom; Onimaru seizes old Kinu's coffin and slouches towards the fog.

Yoshida's *jidaigeki*⁹⁰ transposition of *Wuthering Heights*, set in medieval Japan, follows Onimaru (Heathcliff, played by Yūsaku Matsuda) until his concluding downfall. Yoshimaru (Hareton, played by Masato Furuoya) fights Onimaru in a duel reminiscent of *chanbara*⁹¹ swordplay style, and fatally injures him. Yoshimaru and Kinu (young Catherine, played by Tomoko Takabe) are now free from “Onimaru’s curse”, and free to marry. As the couple heads to the House of the West (Thrushcross Grange), the horse carrying Kinu’s mother’s casket breaks free, and runs uphill to join Onimaru, who,

⁹⁰ Japanese “period drama” film genre.

⁹¹ Japanese “samurai cinema” film genre.

despite his maimed arm, takes hold of the coffin and, in the film closing sequence, drags it away with him in the mist (see fig. 26). Yoshida's *Onimaru* is perhaps the sole example among *Wuthering Heights* adaptations to practice fidelity to the original plotline as well as accuracy to secondary, critical sources. Its departure from a Wyler-esque tendency to blunt Heathcliff's rage by picturing sadistic fury as a direct result of scorned love, however, is less neat.

Another contemporary adaptation indicates Bataille's essay as a shaping influence on its treatment of *Wuthering Heights*, yet the overall result locates itself halfway between Wyler's melodramatic love story and Yoshida's subject-oriented translation. Jacques Rivette's 1985 French adaptation *Hurlevent* preemptively warns audiences of its partiality: the white sign "d'après les premiers chapitres de 'Wuthering Heights' d'Emily Brontë" ("after the first chapters of 'Wuthering Heights' by Emily Brontë") stands against a black background during the film's opening titles. The selection follows the choice made by French painter Balthus (Balthasar Kłossowski de Rola) in his illustration series about *Wuthering Heights*, which Rivette quotes as a major inspiration behind his film. Balthus' series focuses on the protagonists' childhood up to Catherine's death in a set of minimalist black-ink on paper drawings, and was part of a 1983 Balthus retrospective which Rivette attended at Centre Pompidou in Paris (see fig. 27). Mary Wiles contends, in her paper "From the Brontëan Text to the Tableaux: Jacques Rivette's *Hurlevent*" (2016), that Balthus' own inspiration was affected by the Surrealist milieu he was in touch with in the 1930's, although he maintained his independence as an artist. Eight of his twenty-four *Wuthering Heights* illustrations were published in the Surrealist review *Minotaure* in 1935, concurrently with Luis Buñuel's early drafting of his own *Wuthering Heights* adaptation, *Abismos de pasión*, which he was only able to realise years later, in Mexico. Rivette, nevertheless, sets his adaptation in provincial France – more specifically, in the Ardèche department within the Auvergne-Rhône- Alpes region of Southeastern France – at the time when Balthus was presumably working on his sketches, the 1930's interwar period. The implications of Rivette's chosen time and locale evoke a "dark sensuality" (Wiles 4) pertaining to the 1930's zeitgeist, which allegedly displayed a fascination with the macabre, the violent side of sexuality and the raw character of provincial life.



Fig. 27. Balthus' illustrations for *Wuthering Heights/Les Hauts de Hurlevent*. Left: "Parce que Cathy lui enseignait ce qu'elle apprenait..." illustration from 1933 first published in the book "*Les Hauts de Hurlevent*" edited by Éditions Séguier in 1989. Right: "Study for an Illustration for 'Wuthering Heights'", 1932-33.

Hurlevent exempts child actors from participating in the adaptation: the characters are portrayed as having the same age as the young adult actors, thus reworking the "idyllic" mythical state of childhood into a recent, unresolved past. Moreover, Rivette's employment of dream sequences frames explicitly erotic scenes into a distanced narrative of untold facts and implied acts. Guillaume's (Hindley) dream opens the film as a seemingly objective scene – hazy visuals, musical accompaniment and other "dreamlike" cinematic effects are discarded – which simultaneously foretells, remembers and, being a dream, expresses dread with regards to the incestuous-like relationship between adolescent Catherine and Roche (Heathcliff). The portrayal of adolescence and young adulthood in *Hurlevent* is at odds, visually and content-wise, with the age bracket chosen, for instance, by Wyler and Buñuel – whose characters are

shown as 30 to 40-year-olds – and thus convincingly posits the occurrence of rage and erotic obsession as a comprehensible (almost justifiable) feature of juvenility. Yet, the psychological dynamism suggested by the plotline and character development is visually undermined by a rather static compositional style, which is highly reminiscent of Balthus' own graphic arrangement in his drawings.

Characters' bodily presence is rendered as geometrically integrated with their environment, either man-made indoor furniture or natural landscapes: the organicity of different materials is organised in straight lines, made by lying bodies against horizontal surfaces, or curling shapes that enhance the angularity of their surroundings (see fig. 28). Despite the extensive employment of local *garrigue* scrubland bushes – a Mediterranean counterpart to the Yorkshire moors – as natural backdrop, shades of complementary reds and greens recur as natural and artificial palettes, so much so that it is virtually impossible to distinguish the indoor from the outdoor as human characters interact with their environment. The overall effect is of theatricality rather than cinematicity: the fixedness of the visual composition persists from one scene to the next, thus suggesting the progression of a *tableaux* series instead of filmic flow. Mary Wiles contends that Rivette's exercise in spatial delimitation allays "[...] the filmmaker's fantasy of possession of the literary text" (20), his efforts, however, is conscious of its ultimate inability to fully grasp the text by way of adaptation. Yet, the visualisation enacted by Rivette, I would argue, does not betray any appropriative wish, rather, it enlarges the local and linguistic boundaries of the literary source to retrace its foundational elements onto a context that responds, fictionally, to actual geo-historical elements more akin to the director's experience.



Fig. 28. Catherine's static styling in *Hurlevent*. Clockwise from top-left: Catherine (played by Fabienne Babe) lies in a sensual pose on top of a pool table; Catherine rests her head and torso on the kitchen table during her confessional conversation with H el ene (Nelly, played by Sandra Montaigu); Catherine in an elegant outfit sits next to a table laid with a tea set and open book; Catherine in a revealing outfit sits barefoot next to Roche (Heathcliff, played by Lucas Belvaux) on top of a barren rock.

Spanish director Luis Bu uel's acknowledgement of geo-historical context took a literal turn with regards to his decade-long attempt to produce and distribute his own *Wuthering Heights* adaptations. The first draft of Bu uel's script was written circa 1932 in collaboration with Pierre Unik and Georges Sadoul. The film would ideally be shot in the Spanish region of Las Hurdes, whose desolate natural and social landscape could conjure a fitting counterpart to the Heights' Yorkshire.⁹² However, developments beyond initial stages were rendered impossible, among lack of founding and diverging opinions regarding commercial access, by Bu uel's self-imposed exile following the Spanish Civil War in 1939. Following a few years in the United States, Bu uel eventually relocated to

⁹² In 1933 Bu uel filmed a pseudo-documentary about the region, titled *Las Hurdes: Tierra Sin Pan* (*Land Without Bread* or *Unpromised Land*) which displayed with utmost gravity the poor living conditions endured by the inhabitants of the remote area.

Mexico in the late 1940's, where he was able to resume working as a film director, and finally film *Wuthering Heights* in 1954 out of the same script he had written almost twenty five years earlier. The Mexican commercial cinema industry Buñuel was working in, however, could not spare him full liberty with regards to production: the cast had already been formed – the actors were handed down from a cancelled musical, and their different accents contribute to the jarring effect of their melodramatic acting style – the setting, moreover, was changed to nineteenth century rural Mexico. Most interestingly, the novel's time-span covered by *Abismos de pasión* is unique among all adaptations: the middle chapters alone are treated, thus only portraying the adult life of the protagonists without any flashback to their idealised childhood years, starting with Alejandro's (Heathcliff) return after a ten-year absence and ending with Catalina's (Catherine) death. Moreover, since Catalina and Eduardo (Edgar) do not bear living children, the entire second-generation plot is erased from the adaptation, thus severing the atoning potential of the story. Instead, Buñuel's film enhances the fatalistic sides of the story, as María Seijo Richart notes in her paper "Buñuel's Heights: *Abismos de Pasión*" (2002), "This is a deeply pessimistic film. The characters are presented in their thirties, and the decisions which marked their lives have already been taken" (30). Moreover, Buñuel does not allocate any ghostly reunion for Catalina and Alejandro (and for the audience to enjoy): "The word 'Fin' superimposes the close-up of the tombstone falling down. This is the saddest conclusion: there is nothing after death" (Seijo Richart 32). Yet, the *amour fou* principle that had fascinated Buñuel as a Surrealist in 1930's Paris still succeeded to translate in the exaggerated theatrics of its Mexican adaptation: Heathcliff's unruly and masochistic behaviour is as suited to challenge bourgeois conventions as it successfully drives on a narrative arch based on romantic bedazzlement and dramatic climaxes. Anthony Fragola, in his 1994 paper "Buñuel's Re-vision of *Wuthering Heights*", locates in *Abismos* the most faithful correlative of Brontë's description of "mad love" as a force that unites two people only to find closure in death (52). The Surrealist notion of *amour fou* posits the lovers' passion as a force that exceeds worldly boundaries – let alone societal conventions – destroys its surroundings and transcends into a form of death. Moreover, "Buñuel's ending underscores his belief that the lovers, consumed by 'mad love,' can find fulfillment and

completion, but only in the present, not in the afterlife” (Fragola 53), thus advancing a fundamentally atheistic vision of the bond between the protagonists *after* death, in addition to a fatalistic understanding of its repressed development *before* death.

Buñuel’s Alejandro/Heathcliff exemplifies, to the limits of mockery, the child-like freedom he gains out of utter disregard of social conventions. Buñuel’s stresses the implications in Heathcliff’s return to disrupt the respectable family life at La Granja (Thrushcross Grange) by crafting a Alejandro whose nostalgic attachment to a lost condition of childhood makes up his whole identity. It is, perhaps, cruelly ironic to deprive the film of visuals (either via dream sequences of flashbacks) of the idyllic past, still the overall effect is neat: Alejandro’s infantile moral code is pointless in a world that has decided to grow up, but will nonetheless bring material devastation upon all characters, especially Catalina, despite her outward adherence to adult social codes and her compliance to domesticity. It is also how the film manages to convey “[...] much of the novel’s iconoclastic energy” (151), using Julie Jones’ terms in her paper “Fatal Attraction: Buñuel’s Romance with *Wuthering Heights*” (1997). The sole scene that directly addresses the shared childhood of Alejandro and Catalina employs the outdoor space as a material repository of memory and as a metaphorical correlative for the protagonists’ infancy. During their hike on the heath – a dry hummocky landscape in this version – Alejandro and Catalina recover a series of objects they had collected and hidden as children, a torch, a knife and a coil of rope, which they intended to use when escaping together to board a ship (despite the fact that the only available body of water in their proximity is a flat pond they will only ever sit next to). The recovery only marks their inevitable separation as adults, since the plans they had devised as children now appear utterly unattainable (see fig. 29). The scarce trace of union they manage to salvage comes to light as the couple curls up into a hollow tree trunk, whose knotty roots also provide the backdrop for the film’s opening credits. While the visual symbolism of the tree easily evokes the lover’s bond of supposed “rootedness” into the land they grew up in, it also signals, literally, the existence of physical ties with one’s ancestors and descendants. A metaphor made all the more cruel by Buñuel, who gives full prominence to a desiccated tree whose roots are exposed, a clear indication of its barren, possibly dead status.

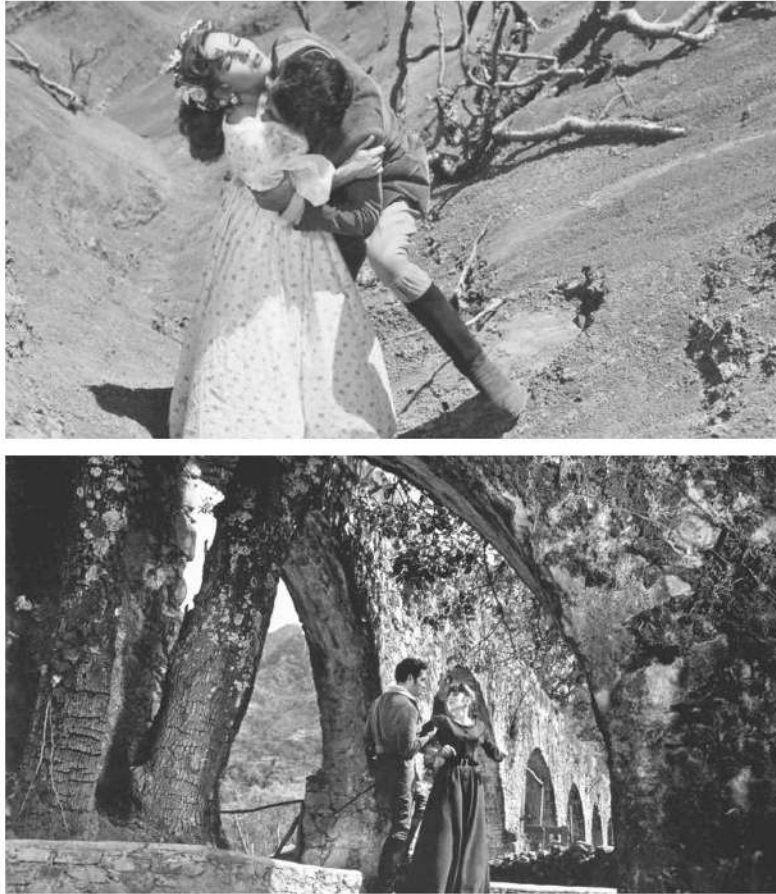


Fig. 29. Outdoor scenes in *Abismos de pasión* and instances of romanticised violence between Alejandro (played by Jorge Mistral) and Catalina (played by Irasema Dilián). Top, on the dry hillside; bottom, between high trees and ruined walls.

The detailed uprootedness filling the opening frames seems to foretell the descending arch of the narrative, down to its definitive subterranean separation at the end, the lineage ending with the bitter death of the protagonists. Moreover, the presence of the tree is arguably overbearing in comparison with the human scene it purportedly frames, as Susan Mary Pyke asserts in *Animal Visions. Posthumanist Dream Writing* (2019): incommensurate arboreal and human volumes suggest that “[...] other than human matter operates independently from the dominion fantasised by some members of the human species” (206).

Nature as refuge may become all the more symbolic since the rest of the film mainly takes place in stuffy studio indoor, the interiors of richly decorated La Granja, in whose

rooms Eduardo passes the time pinning butterflies into glass frames during marital arguments with his wife, and where Isabel (Isabella) runs away, frightened, upon hearing the cries of a pig being killed, a foreboding omen before her marriage to Alejandro. As Seijo Richart notes in her 2002 paper:

Abismos de pasión portrays a violent environment in which persons seem to have less value than the insects (a recurrent symbol in Buñuel's universe) and animals with which they are constantly compared. (30)

Pity or identification, however, are not the affects that Buñuel's seems willing to elicit, on the contrary the distance he creates from his characters is all the more stark for the isolated, faraway, static poses he casts them into. Nature itself, on the other hand, is fully neutral, not, in itself, a locus of salvation: the cruelty happening "in the wild" is forgetful, perhaps forging, contrary to the sharp sadism that animates humans.

An opposite take on the vicinity with nature in *Abismos* as proxy for physical suffering is Pyke's posthumanist reading, whereby the violence against human and non-human animals – both enacted and suggested on screen – might serve to deepen the sense of affective, as well as moral unease. The emphasis here is on the audience's experience as the foremost vector of meaning: "In this receptive state, audiences have the option to be with nonhuman animals differently, an invitation that is also extended in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" (Pyke 257). Even more literal in his transactional understanding of the natural world as portrayed in *Abismos* is Fragola, who reads the film in terms of Brontë's purported dichotomous treatment of conflict, as between non-human natural realms and human societal constructions (53). Yet, Fragola also lists "pictorial elements", "naturalistic detail[s]" – such as the clouds – as "self-referent[s]" (54) to earlier (Surrealist) Buñuel's film, *Andalusian Dog* (1929) and *L'âge d'or* (1930). Natural elements, as non-narrative instances, precede, or introduce, the action-based violence in each film, such as the clouds covering the moon observed right before the eye is sliced with a razor in *Un chien andalou*, or the clouds that accompany the meetings of Alejandro and Catalina in *Abismos*. Furthermore, Fragola adds:

The clouds, cow, and cowbells reveal that the lovers in *L'âge d'or*, as well as Caterina [sic.] and Alejandro, belong to the natural order of instinct that transcends the limitations of earthly societal barriers. (54)

Overall, *Abismos* seems able to function on multiple levels: it is, at face value, a highly enjoyable melodrama, whose bathos – contrasting international accents, exaggerated mimicry, etcetera – does not undermine the dramatic effect, rather, it complements the tragic, dark undertone that Buñuel does not shy away from telling. The concentrated plot borrows from a handful of central chapters of Brontë's eventful novel to craft a disillusioned surrender to adulthood, or rather, moral sidelining as a consequence of irredeemable life choices. Were it not for the cast's expressive, colourful acting, the bleak realisation of their characters' fatal defeat would make too sorrowful a commercial picture to market, or even just to watch. The relationship they seek in order to fulfill their feelings of love is unrealisable, both within societal bonds as well as in its own independent terms, thus leaving only the memory of childhood idyll as a viable (albeit virtual) matrix. The original Surrealist preoccupation with formidable love force clashing against societal conventions is superseded by a sunlit "day-nightmare" about individual helplessness facing the flow of one's life in time, with the passing of actual decades in the life of its creator – over twenty years of escape, exile and war – playing a contributing factor in the film's fatalistic tone. Buñuel's drama of personal failure and restricted narrative scope strikes a rather gloomy note, it creates a mood, nevertheless, that appears to resonate with other adaptations, especially those that address the multigenerational chain explored in the novel, and develop further the theme of nature. By taking advantage of the visual medium, in order to, for instance, enlarge upon the issue of ownership and coexistence between human and non-human realms, film adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* have been able to turn the plotline into a narrative arch deeper than a neatly framed story of tainted affections.

This chapter has attempted to suggest a departure from the standard reading of *Wuthering Heights* as a tragic narrative *because* of its unhappy love relationships. Namely, the consistent concern for the ways in which land ownership, landscape appreciation and human life is spent alongside non-human beings that the novel

contains and develops as crucial elements of its plot, exists in adapted products, and displays attempts to approach the subject matter that encompass and exceed human-to-human responsibilities or effects to include wider forms of awareness. Starting from the most recent adaptation, Andrea Arnold's 2011 film *Wuthering Heights*, working backwards, towards A.V. Bramble's 1920 first silent film adaptation, and laterally to include cinematic adaptation outside the commercial and/or Anglophile field, such as Jacques Rivette's 1985 rural French rendition *Hurlevent* or Yoshida Yoshishige's 1988 medieval Japan's adaptation *Onimaru*, my discussion has traced the undercurrent tendency to employ background natural elements to read and re-read Brontë's source text. In conclusion, I argue that the historical and ongoing fascination with *Wuthering Heights* as viable material for adaptations and retelling remains, indeed, a result of its popular reputation as a heritage classic, but it also signals a newfound interest in no longer only addressing Brontë's novel as a tale about violence, obsession, love and the liminal aspects that the three are customarily, culturally brought to convey. Increasingly, *Wuthering Heights* is becoming a work about human relationship with natural, non-human life, either in the form of savage, tame and domestic animals or one's surrounding natural landscapes, either kept wild or anthropized, with Arnold's adaptation being the foremost example of this tendency. Whether this decentred angle is symptomatic of larger issues about environmental consciousness and anxiety regarding the conservation and livability of is up for discussion. A revisionist critical stance could, however, be useful in reframing the relevance and reputation of a title as well-known as *Wuthering Heights* as a work, for instance, that allows its readers/viewers to think about the intersections at play behind human agency, and perhaps rediscover the implications within one's responsibility to handle (and safeguard) the heritage received from one's elders, as well as to envisage what is bound to become one's legacy.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to describe patterns of narrative and stylistic adaptation via a set of case studies, whose features, or production history, challenge the conventional notion of adaptation as a hierarchical, unidirectional practice, or a mere translation of plotlines across media. It was especially interested in charting how narrative iterations and thematic repetition occur between literary and filmic products when adaptation practices stretch the notions of fidelity and similarity to include, among others, film-to-film borrowings, or multi-sourced interpretations of a work's context.

As its foundational point of departure, it approached literary to filmic adaptations as forms of cultural repositories, addressing each as the result of layerings of signification, building over time out of the migration of narrative data, and existing as historical reiterations of the same titles, characters and plot lines across multimedia formats. Overall, adaptations appear to have a retroactive, as well as a recursive potentiality over their sources. Moreover, the constellation of similar, but often conflicting imaginings of the same original objects co-exist in culture, and foster subjective, vernacular, as well as original and opposite responses which, in turn, influence the survival and effect of those same objects as meaningful cultural and sentimental instruments. The notion of fidelity, along with a critical stance that employs comparison and contrast, it has argued, are not fully successful in accounting for the acts and, above all, effects produced by inter-media adaptations, especially when it comes to acknowledge audience's experiences.

Jane Campion's directorial work has provided examples of indirect, cumulative and, overall, highly personal uses of adaptation in her treatment of existing sources. In Campion's operation, attention to background and material details is key: crafting a specific mood and atmosphere via light and composition, the employment of her signature haptic up-close shots to highlight small objects and certain body parts, her

attention to costume as a primary narrative force are all instrumental to achieving the particular strand of enchanted familiarity that distinguishes her filmography. Furthermore, Campion's costume films set in the nineteenth century represent (imaginary and historical) past lives as difficult, virtually rightless and further aggravated by the heroines' gender identity: in this sense, her stories seem work as an informal benchmark for the appraisal of the evolution of (wealthy) women's lives. By leveraging the temporal gap existing between subject matter and audiences – further heightened by the paradox of cinematic technology – Campion supplies a historical perspective, halfway between the unscholarly and the vernacular, on the human changes that occurred in a comparatively long span of human social time. Simultaneously, Campion twists and bends canonical and official narratives to provide fuller accounts of established ideas about life in the past, and enriches them with a hypothetical tale of their emotional, personal quality. Overall, Campion demonstrates how adaptation, as an act of cultural repurposing, can function beyond the page-to-screen paradigm, and contributes to broadening the capabilities of the adaptive approach by crafting a highly inventive treatment of her materials.

The ongoing adaptation history of *Wuthering Heights* across a wide range of media, on the other hand, tells a story that counterpoises the upward arc of human improvement sketchedly implied by Campion. It seems that over a century of cinematic adaptations based, more or less loosely, on Emily Brontë's novel address the issue of time – perceived primarily on a human scale – in competing terms of legacy and loss. History in *Wuthering Heights* adaptations is marginal, at the heart of a story that is told repeatedly is the testimony of what is lost to greed, to negligence, to lack of planning or forward-thinking. The crucial role played by natural landscape – specifically the moors as *topos* – as an identifying trait of *Wuthering Heights* bespeaks the relevance of a long-standing discourse concerned with the downsides of social ease, and the threat of alienation brought forth by the annihilation of natural liveable realms. The primitive, extended time of non-human earthlings collides against the short-lived experience of human life, further revealing the ephemerality of mediated experiences such as film-watching or novel-reading. The solid reputation of *Wuthering Heights* as a narrative, nevertheless, lives on and develops in translations, and the impact of its visual

adaptations is likely to have repercussions on the ways the source novel is read, taught and remembered. My interpretations of the case studies respond – as they detect counteractive storytelling modes that seemingly draw opposite conclusions – to current needs regarding the role, purpose and aim of literary narratives and the modalities for their fruition. Period adaptations seem to contribute to an understanding of narrative approaches that, at best, evoke a re-encharmed vision of the world and, at worst, indulge in a peculiar nostalgic streak, indicating how haunted by the longing for the past our contemporary popular culture is. In either case, the immediate role that these narrative products seem to achieve is that to assuage the anxieties caused by a present life spent with the awareness, and somewhat influenced by the picture of a pressing future existence imagined in disastrous and dystopic tones.

The limited scope of this research leaves ample room for further in-depth analysis. For instance, an appraisal of Campion's *other* adaptations – *An Angel at My Table* and *In the Cut* – should be accompanied by a general appraisal of her relevance as a filmmaker for contemporary global cinema, as well as a comparative, collective analytic effort that could rightfully acknowledge the reach of her legacy. The consistent interest for *Wuthering Heights* demonstrated by film industries other than Western, Anglophone ones should also be properly addressed, considering the wealth of original interventions and proficient adaptation to local characteristics that are displayed in Asian and European productions. Moreover, it would be interesting to pursue the study of intermedia adaptations according to flexible criteria that could, for instance, acknowledge the influence of commercial pressures to provide general audiences with an “escapist lure” via adaptations, a tendency that risks generating a self-referencing repository of fail-safe celebrated titles, curated galleries of “period-feel” details and few innovations beyond “identity” and “diversity” tokenism, or the implementation of erotic undertones. On a theoretical level, I would like to read more critical works engaging with the description of original or specific elements in film adaptations that reflect back to their source and change it indelibly, or, alternatively, are able to sustain an unobtrusive dialogue with previous film adaptations, or other media adaptation of the same material. In addition, detailed studies about adaptive works whose principal referent is absent, unacknowledged, diffused or composite could help the field expand its vocabulary as

well as its pool of references. I came to this research with the firm conviction that adaptation as an artistic and expressive form should be granted full independence, be evaluated on its own, medium-specific terms, beyond comparison and contrast, and maintain this view throughout. In conclusion, I mostly find myself in agreement with (and attempt to practice myself) critical stances attempting to overcome the “catalogue” effect generated when listing analogies and poetic licences. The source/adaptation dichotomy, on the contrary, provides insight into the quality of the authorial reading, and exists independently, as a revelatory, mirroring act.

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

Studentessa: Francesca Massarenti
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Dottorato: Lingue, culture e società
Ciclo: XXXIII

Titolo della tesi: *Narrative Dynamics, Adaptive Practices. Fragmentary, Circular and Indirect Pathways from Literary Source to Filmic Adaptation.*

Abstract:

Questa tesi descrive una serie di dinamiche narrative rintracciabili nell'adattamento dal romanzo al film. Si concentra soprattutto sulle pratiche adattive che favoriscono approcci digressivi, eterogenei, soggettivi e compositi all'appropriazione delle fonti e al loro sviluppo transmediale. Nel complesso, questo lavoro cerca di rintracciare le modalità in cui iterazioni narrative e ripetizioni tematiche sono eseguite oltre lo standard adattivo basato sulla trama, per esempio, attraverso prestiti con origini molteplici, o aggiunte originali indirizzate alla creazione di rapporti non gerarchici tra prodotti letterari e filmici. La tesi è composta da tre capitoli: un'introduzione teorica e due casi studio. Il capitolo 1 illustra una serie di proposte teoriche incentrate su teorie della narratività, la nozione di "storia" attraverso media visuali e verbali, il concetto di "adattamento". Il capitolo 2 si focalizza sul lavoro di Jane Campion, privilegiando il trittico "d'epoca" all'interno del suo corpus più ampio, una serie di film in costume ambientati nel diciannovesimo secolo: *The Piano*, *The Portrait of a Lady* e *Bright Star*. Il capitolo 3 presenta la storia degli adattamenti dal romanzo *Wuthering Heights* di Emily Brontë attraverso il prisma dell'ambientazione al posto dello sviluppo della trama incentrata sui personaggi.

This thesis describes a series of narrative dynamics occurring in novel to film adaptations. It is especially concerned with adaptive practices that favour digressive, heterogeneous, subjective and composite approaches to the appropriation of source materials and their transmedial development. Overall, this work seeks to chart how narrative iterations and thematic repetition are executed beyond a plot-based adaptation standard, for instance, by means of multi-sourced borrowings, or original additions aiming towards non-hierarchical relationships between literary and filmic products. The thesis is composed of three chapters: an introductory literature review and two case studies. Chapter 1 surveys a series of contemporary theoretical contributions dealing with theories of narrativity, the notion of "story" across media and the concept of "adaptation". Chapter 2 focuses on the work of director Jane Campion, privileging the "period" triptych within her larger corpus, that is, a series of costume films set in the nineteenth century: *The Piano*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Bright Star*. Chapter 3 presents the adaptation history of the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë through the lens of setting and ambiance, in lieu of character-driven plot development.

Firma della studentessa

