Film Adaptations as Intersemiotic Contact Zones: *Edge of Madness* by Anne Wheeler

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Abstract
This article seeks to discuss the intersemiotic translation as a privileged contact zone, with a focus on *Edge of Madness* by Anne Wheeler, the film transposition of Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station". Originating in an intertextual contact zone, the tension between the adapted text and the adaptation produces meaning (Hutcheon 2013), expressed as story(re) telling. Rather than being filtered through the simplistic and abused lens of "fidelity discourse", the cinematographic narrative is acknowledged as an independent story generated by the Canadian author's storytelling impulse, by the story(re)telling tension inherent in her own narrative. In this vein, socio-semiotic multimodal analysis provides a suitable methodological framework (Bateman and Schmidt 2012), as it illuminates the meaning-making potential of socio-culturally negotiated modes and modal resources. Specifically, this article addresses the semiotic function of the close-up. This size-of-frame technique is systematically adopted 1. ideationally, to represent and foreground the female protagonist, 2. interpersonally, to establish intimate social distance among interactive participants, and 3. textually, to trigger shifts from present and past narrative strands.
Keywords: adaptation(s), intersemiosis, Wheeler, Munro.

> [T]he dress Old Annie was wearing underneath was of plum-colored silk. In fact it was made over from the one she had made for my grandmother to meet the Prince of Wales in.
>
> (A. Munro)

1. Introduction

This article seeks to discuss *Edge of Madness*, a film by the Canadian director Anne Wheeler (2002), produced by Lions Gate Films and featuring Caroline Dhavernas, Brendan Fehr, Jonas Chernick and Corey Siever. Set in 1851, in the Red River Valley in a remote area of

Manitoba (Canada), the work opens as an exhausted and bruised young woman, Annie, reaches shelter, having struggled on foot across the snow-covered wilderness. In front of a Clerk of the Peace, she confesses the murder of her husband, Simon Herron. Several flashbacks reveal Annie's past: when she was 'chosen' by Simon, in need of a wife, from an orphanage; when she was repeatedly abused by her husband and defended by his brother George; when she wrote letters to her friend Sadie.

The film is based on the epistolary short story "A Wilderness Station", from Alice Munro's eighth collection *Open Secrets* (1994). Munro's narrative includes eleven letters, the first dated January 1853, the last July 1959, as well as one magazine article written by George Herron. In this polyphonic story (Löschnigg 2017: 98), the texts have been collected by a historian, Leopold Henry from Queen's University, who is researching the life of a politician from Huron County and tries to recapture the nineteenth-century pioneer period in south-western Ontario (Duncan 2003: 99). "A Wilderness Station" is set in the middle of the bush, where two young brothers, George and Simon, start a new life with Simon's wife, Annie. Simon soon dies in an accident while clearing trees, but the divergent versions of his death described across the various letters suggest a murder may have been perpetrated because of his violent behaviour. Ultimately, the man's death remains a mystery that is never resolved.

Edge of Madness is here addressed and inspected as an intersemiotic translation, in an attempt to overcome the abused lens of "fidelity discourse" (Hutcheon 2013; McFarlane 1996; Stam 2014). When a literary adaptation is appreciated as adaptation, it configures a "palimpsestic intertextuality" (Hutcheon 2013: 22), a layered textuality, showing traces of different texts, which are constantly and differently evoked, cited, and generally celebrated. The intertextual relation is far from linear, and the contact zone becomes a site of convergence and/as divergence, of continuity and/as discontinuity. The film transcodification is, thus, a site of tension, where the adapted text is negated while it is adapted. Originating in the intertextual contact zone, this narrative friction yet generates meaning, expressed as story(re)telling.

I argue that socio-semiotic multimodal analysis provides an appropriate methodological framework (Bateman and Schmidt 2012) for exploring this contact zone as a space of storytelling

tension, because it foregrounds the meaning-making potential of socio-culturally negotiated modes and modal resources (*e.g.*, camera movement, size of frame, shot transition, colour changes, illumination). This enables us to engage with semiotic affordances and constraints and with plural and diverse ways of telling a story within given contexts. In this article, I specifically analyse and discuss the meaning potential of the close-up in the adapted film.

This article is organised into 5 distinct sections. After an introduction to the aims and focus of the contribution, the next section outlines the literature on film transcodification and, more specifically, on adaptations of Munro's works. Following, are two sections that discuss the theory and methodological tools used to analyse adaptations. Then comes an analysis and discussion of Wheeler's film transposition. The final section includes the conclusion, which positions the article within a broader research project and outlines future research plans.

2. Literature Review

As a multidisciplinary field of enquiry, the film adaptation of literary works is currently being addressed from a range of literary, media, and semiotic perspectives. Privileged disciplinary fields include, but are not limited to, comparative literature, literature and film, media, communication studies, translation studies, semiotics and multimodality. Cross-disciplinary publications regularly appear in scientific journals, such as, *Adaptation*, the *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance* and *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

If the origins of the contemporary critical debate may be traced back to pioneering works such as George Bluestone's *Novels into Film* (1957), more recent contributions include, among others: Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film* (1996); Robert Stam's edited volumes *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (2005), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (2004), *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2004), the last two co-edited by Raengo; Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006); and Nicola Dusi's *Il cinema come traduzione. Da un medium all'altro: letteratura, cinema e pittura* (2003). The present article relies on Hutcheon's reconceptualisation of adaptation(s), as illustrated in the next section.

Overall, critical attention to the inter-semiotic translation of Munro's oeuvre is modest (Bodal and Strehlau 2016: 67; Ue 2014: 175). This oversight is quite surprising, given the popularity of the Nobel-winning author and how highly she is esteemed by the general public and academics alike. Reasons are multifold and multifaceted. Critical neglect may be due, firstly, to the fact that some films are difficult to access (Herz 2013). A second reason may be the author's lack of involvement in the adaptation process, at both the preparation and promotion stages. Indeed, Munro has consistently claimed that film transcodifications are independent stories, different and distinct from her own (Ue 2015: 176).

Only a few television and film adaptations of Munro's work have been critically evaluated. With several dedicated works, a positive exception is *Away from Her*, by the Canadian director Sarah Polley (2006). The first study, to my knowledge, was by McGill (2008), who focused on the representation of fidelity in the short story and in its adaptation. Attention to meaning-making strategies, such as framing, camera movement, distance, transition ties (especially cuts and dissolves) is central in Berthin-Scallet (2010), while Saidero (2017) focuses on the inter-linguistic (English-Italian) and inter-semiotic translation processes. The representation of dementia is central in contributions by Francesconi (2018a) and Concilio (2018): the first explores the unfolding of time and the achievement of cohesion across the two narratives, the second focuses on agency-related issues as a patient with Alzheimer's goes through the aging process.

Produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1994, *Lives of Girls and Women* has recently received critical attention within the Polish academy. Leszczynska (2016) examines the growth of Del Jordan as a writer, thus considering the film as a (remediated) Künstlerroman. Suchorska (2016) carries out a comparative analysis of Holland's *Washington Square* and Wilson's *Lives of Girls and Women*, with a focus on the representation and development of the female protagonists – Catherine Sloper and Del Jordan – as they transition from naive and innocent girls, to mature and independent women. The analysis of the short-story cycle by Alice Munro and its film adaptation is also the topic of Leszczynska's Master dissertation (2015), with a focus on time, space and events.

The American film *Hateship Loveship* by Liza Johnson has been inspected by Bodal and Strehlau (2016), with a focus on plot,

characters and settings in the film, and by Francesconi (2018b), who centres her analysis on the process of adapting the letters. Finally, *Boys and Girls* (1983) by Don McBrearty has been examined by Ue (2014), with particular attention to metanarration and the use of perspective and gesture as relevant semiotic systems, in order to construct issues around gender and identity. As far as I know, no studies have yet been published on *Edge of Madness*.

Following the literature review in this section, the next section discusses the theoretical background for the present work.

3. Theory

The lexeme 'adaptation' "refer[s] to both a product and a process of creation and reception" (Hutcheon 2013: xv), thus indicating a) a textual output and b) a hermeneutic and poietic practice. Both meanings foreground the dialogic implicatures, which initiate "[an] extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (2013: 8). Perceiving adaptations as adaptations equals appreciating the "palimpsestic intertextuality" (2013: 22) of the transcodification, *i.e*, identifying mnestic traces of the adapted texts in the adaptation. Adaptations should therefore be understood as developing horizontal relations between texts, and should be examined along the lines of continuity and discontinuity they trace. As such, they should not be conceptualised as subsidiary texts, to be filtered through a simplistic and biased "fidelity discourse" (Hutcheon 2013; McFarlane 1996; Stam 2014).

Not only does the intertextual engagement apply to texts, but also to people, in a mutual shifting between poetics and politics. By means of different media and genres, stories can either be told (*e.g.*, short stories), shown (*e.g.*, film), or offered for interaction (*e.g.*, videogames). In this inclusive and open definition, adaptations allow readers, spectators or players to differently engage with narratives, in terms of their modes and forms of fruition, and will offer different memories of the adapted text. Even if all modes of engagement – telling, showing, and interacting – are immersive, their forms and degrees of immersion may vary significantly at the levels of emotions, cognition and imagination (Hutcheon 2013: 23).

Moreover, engagement happens in a particular socio-cultural environment, in a given spatio-temporal situation, also determined

by economic and political dynamics (Hutcheon 2013: 28). Contextual factors are related to the 'stories' motivating adaptations, and involve the historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors behind the adaptation, as well as the biographical background of the director(s). Directors may transcode a literary work to honour or to criticise a story, thus projecting intimacy with or distance from the author and the work. Alternatively, they may simply exploit a successful and already tested story. Similarly, different motivations may push the audience, as well as scholars, to choose and appreciate a given adaptation.

After illustrating the aesthetic, interpersonal and discursive forms of engagement adaptation enacts, the following section outlines the methodology for the analysis I will use in this paper, *i.e.*, a socio-semiotic multimodal analysis, which enables us to engage with semiotic affordances and modal constraints, as well as with plural and different ways of telling a story within a given context.

4. Method

In order to analyse and discuss close-up semiosis in the film, this article relies on the metafunctional framework developed by Halliday (1978, 2004) and Halliday and Hasan (1975). The three Hallidayan metafunctions (*i.e.*, lines or strands of meaning) encompass the predominant purposes language is used for: the ideational metafunction, concerned with the expression of content (human, natural and cultural environment); the interpersonal metafunction, focused on social relations among interactive participants (speakers/listeners, authors/readers, directors/spectators); the textual metafunction, involved in the construction of the text (organisation, cohesion and coherence).

A socio-semiotic multimodal analysis adopts and adapts this metafunctional framework for communication systems going beyond the verbal, that is, it addresses a range of distinct and alternative modes, often co-occurring with language, in its written or oral form. Modes, thus, become semiotic resources, modes for making meaning. In the multimodal filmic artefact, the three metafunctions are realised by a range of modes and modal resources unfolding in time, projecting onto the visual and aural sensorial systems, and composing the visual and audio tracks. Specifically, the ideational

metafunction is fulfilled through modal resources, such as, actions, space, speech, and types of music. The interpersonal metafunction is then realised through the modal resources of colour, light, angle and size of frame, among others. Moreover, modal resources expressing the textual metafunction include framing, intersemiosis, rhythm, (dis)continuity across shots via light and colour (Bateman and Schmidt 2012). This analysis centres on the metafunctional use of the close-up as a size-of-frame instance.

Derived from film language, size of frame is defined in relation to the specific sections of the human body depicted in an image. In close-ups, only the subject's head and shoulders are shown, while medium shots capture bodies from knees up, and long shots fully depict human beings. The semiotic system of size of frame can also be applied to the representation of objects, whereby only a detail, a portion, or the whole item can be depicted. Clearly, in dynamic texts like a film, size of frame is not a static and given feature. Rather, it is related to time passing and to the sequential unfolding of camera movement: the close-up may either be achieved through a progressive camera movement or a zooming process. Alternatively, the close-up frame may follow a transition, generally a cut, in a dialogue scene.

The main effect of the enactment of size of frame is establishing social distance between the interactive participants, that is, between the characters and spectators. Distance is a graded parameter, ranging from intimate to public distance, and including intermediate degrees of close personal distance and far personal distance, among others. Put simply, close shots express an intimate distance, medium shots a personal distance, and long shots an impersonal distance. In relational terms, the represented participant can be touched by the viewer at close personal distance, while public distance depicts interactive participants as strangers, with an impersonal relation.

After two sections devoted to the theoretical and methodological framework, the following section addresses the behaviour and functions of the close-up in the transcodification.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Defined by Herz as "Munro's first proper film adaptation" (2013), Wheeler's *Edge of Madness* lasts 95 minutes. The main diegetic

film line is composed of 24 scenes, unfolding from Annie's solitary walk in the snowstorm, to George's wedding ceremony and party. Most scenes are set in the dark and claustrophobic Walley Gaol, administered by the Clerk of the Peace James Mullen, where the woman is imprisoned after confessing the murder of her husband Simon. The camera often captures Annie's movements, gestures, and actions, either when she is alone or while she is interacting and/or communicating with other characters.

Across the various scenes, a privileged size-of-frame technique is the close-up of the young woman's face, which establishes an intimate social distance between spectators and the protagonist. Moreover, close-ups are often followed by film units depicting fragments of her memory and scenes from her past, outlining a second narrative line set in the Red River Valley wilderness. Pervasive and relevant, this film strategy deserves critical attention and systemic inspection for frequency, distribution, as well as functional and stylistic implicature. In order to map the presence and role of the close-up within the film composition, the following table illustrates the sequential unfolding of the main narrative in the present and the embedded scenes featuring past events, triggered by close-ups on Annie's face. Notably, all transitions from the first to the second columns are engendered by a close-up shot, which operates as a contact zone between present and past, actions and memories.

TABLE 1
Human participants, places and actions in the filmic present and past narrative lines

		Participants, places and actions	
Scenes		Present	Past
1	00:00-02:30	Annie walks alone in the snowstorm	Fragmented images of fire
2	02:31-04:40	Annie arrives at the Gaol and is put in jail	
3	04:41-06:24	(Writing: Red River Valley) Annie is interviewed and Mullen writes a report	Fragmented images of a murder

(*continued on next page*)

TABLE 1 (*continued from previous page*)

Scenes		Present	Past
4	06:25-06:50	Mullen and doctor comment on Annie's story	
5	06:51-10:08	Annie takes a bath with Ruth, who discovers her book	Fragmented images of the orphanage: Annie and Sadie; Simon's hunt for a wife
6	10:09-12:48	Annie undergoes medical examination	
7	12:49-16:56	Ruth brings new clothes for Annie; Mullen reads Annie's book	In the wild: Simon abuses Annie for the first time
8	16:57-21:09	(Day after) Annie shows her sewing skills and is interviewed again	(2 flashback units) Simon and Annie's relation; Simon's constant complaints
9	21:10-21:58	Mullen and doctor talk about Annie	
10	21:59-28:20	From the gaol's window, Annie watches people having fun at the party	(2 flashback units) Annie, Simon and George; Simon's aggressivity and abuse
11	28:21-32:10	Annie gives Ruth a letter and receives clothes to be sewn	The Treeces visit Annie, Simon and George
12	32:11-35:12	Annie tells Mullen about the mail, he decides to intercept it	Annie and George share a kiss
13	35:13-41:52	Mullen learns of Sadies's death and decides to use correspondence	At the Treeces: pleasant dinner, George sings for the hosts and guests, Simon's rude behaviour, sudden departure, Simon's abuses Annie and fights with George
14	41:53-50:42	Mullen meets Rev. McBain and discovers incongruities in Annie's version	(multiple flashbacks) Fire, Simon shoots at Mr. Treece, Annie asks George to leave with her, Simon and George leave for the bush
15	50:43-1:04:24	Doctor tries to abuse Annie and Mullen invites her for Christmas	George is back with Simon's corpse; George and Annie have sexual intercourse; McBain's arrival
16	1:04:25-1:07:14	Mullen decides to investigate Annie's story by himself	Annie and George's sense of guilt and changes in George's temper
17	1:07:15-1:08:35	Mullen visits the Treeces and listens to their version	

(*continued on next page*)

TABLE 1 (*continued from previous page*)

Scenes		Present	Past
18	1:08:36-1:09:13	Annie delivers her sewing work for the theatre performance	
19	1:09:14-1:13:52	Mullen visits the accident site, finds Simon's remains, meets George and listens to his version	
20	1:13:53-1:14:26	Mullen gets back home and formulates his hypothesis	
21	1:14:27-1:24:00	Annie's letter is sent back through actor; Ruth reveals Annie's pregnancy	George's anxiety; Annie discovers bruise on the corpse; George confesses the murder and leaves
22	1:24:01-1:26:22	Mullen tells Annie of Sadie's death	
23	1:26:23-1:27:47	Mullen burns Annie's letters and writes a report about an accident	
24	1:27:47-1:35:00	(One year later) George's wedding with Miss Treece; Annie and George dance and Annie tells him he's the father of her baby child	

Out of the 24 cinematographic units, 13 feature a close-up of Annie's face, which originates flashbacks about her past. The flashback scenes are not homogeneous in terms of length and composition: the earlier ones are short and fragmentary, the later ones longer and more articulated. The analeptic units generated by scenes 8 and 10 are composed of two scenes each, while the flashback starting in scene 14 is longer and encompasses a multiple-scene unit. From the narrative viewpoint, this technique creates a (dis)continuity in the narrative line by disrupting temporal linearity and by fragmenting narrative homogeneity. Specifically, the two narrative and temporal strands showcase differences in terms of settings, characters, light, and modality markers.

Overall, the close-up performs ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. At the ideational level, it signals the woman as the main represented participant and her thoughts as

the main mental processes. At the interpersonal level, it shapes the intimate social distance between the female character and the spectators. At the textual level, it organises the film structure, acting as a cohesive device and linking present and past, actions and memories. These observations confirm the significant role the close-up strategy plays in the adaptation, both in relation to the construction of the female protagonist and to her positioning within the film narrative.

Following Hutcheon, however, an appreciation of the role and function of the close-up can be better achieved through the observation of the adaptation as process, rather than only as product. In this case, this means looking at the story of the adaptation from the viewpoint of family history. The kernel of the short story, Simon's death, is based on a real incident in Munro's paternal family history (Duncan 2003: 99). Indeed, Munro's great-great-grandfather was a Scots Presbyterian who migrated to Canada in 1818 from the Ettrick Valley in Scotland (Carrington 1996: 71), a story Munro extensively narrates in her 2006 collection *The View from Castle Rock*. Starting from tragic authentic facts related to her by her Laidlaw ancestors, Munro inserted a female protagonist and describes the "hard, punishing pioneer life" (p. 71) of the Huron Tract from a gendered perspective.

Notably, one of Munro's ancestors was James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). In "A Wilderness Station", explicit reference is made by Reverend McBain to the sermon "The Crook in the Lot" by Thomas Boston. A minister in Ettrick from 1707 to 1732, Boston was known by James Hogg, who used his sermons in his work *A Justified Sinner* (Carrington 1996: 71). In the short story, in his letter to James Mullen, McBain quotes this passage from the sermon: "This world is a wilderness, in which we may indeed get our station changed, but the move will be out of one wilderness station unto another" (Munro 1995: 204). By evoking the endless afflictions human beings experience, this intertextual excerpt gives Munro's story its title and showcases a multifaceted and multifunctional role. In the Canadian epistolary text, "in addition to the literal wilderness of the setting and the metaphorical wilderness created by the story's narrative technique, the wilderness is a symbolic mirror of Annie's mind" (Carrington 1996: 72).

Interestingly, in the short story, the protagonist's mind is defined as insane by both the doctor and the reverend. The medical authority identifies the reason in Annie's reading habits (p. 205), while the religious authority points to her "not complete […] submission to her husband" (p. 203). Rejecting and overcoming these biased and patriarchal mindsets, Wheeler's pervasive and emphatic close-ups invite us to approach, observe, listen to, and feel with the female character. Through a multimodally-shaped intimacy, spectators can understand and deconstruct the ideological label of madness attached to women in south-western Ontario's pioneering nineteenth-century past.

Following Wheeler's invitation, spectators appreciate this layered and fluid character and engage with Annie the mad, the reader, the seamstress, the adaptor, the storyteller. The protagonist of the short story "A Wilderness Station" is a seamstress and in the passage used as an epigraph, she is adapting a "plum-colored silk" dress, using material from an item she had made for another person, on another occasion and for another purpose. She is also the one who passionately invents and modifies stories (even about Simon's death). Hence, the case study for the present article seems to configure an obsessive and circular process of adaptation as retelling: the film adapts a short story, which adapts a historical event from a female perspective, and embeds intertextual references to a Scottish sermon, mentioning a state of mind later foregrounded and adapted in the film transcodification.

6. Conclusion

This article has addressed *Edge of Madness* by Anne Wheeler as the adaptation of Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station". The protagonist of the adapted short story, Annie, is a seamstress and a storyteller, who deftly adapts clothes and stories. In turn, "A Wilderness Station" is an adaptation of an authentic incident that actually took place in the author's family history. It also adapts *A Justified Sinner* by James Hogg, acknowledging the original in the short-story title itself and in a quotation. In a constant story(re)telling process, the film acts as a privileged contact zone, a layered textuality where previous stories intermingle, transform, and engender other stories. In this vein, Wheeler's film configures an intersemiotic translation,

generated by Munro's passion for storytelling and story(re)telling, but relying on different narrative modes and modal resources.

The socio-semiotic multimodal analysis of the film adaptation has centred on the behaviour and function of the close-up, discussed in terms of its metafunctional potential and stylistic implicatures. The close-up is, at the same time, a strategy for showing and foregrounding the female protagonist, for establishing an intimate social distance between spectators and protagonist, and for text structuring. The whole film is, indeed, constructed through several flashbacks narrating Annie's story, and all flashbacks originate from close-ups of the young woman's face. The solution seems to intersemiotically translate, honour and enhance Munro's project for her story: if the Nobel laureate wanted to add a female character to the family history of the accident, the Canadian director makes Annie the ideational, interpersonal and textual core of the film.

As part of a broader ongoing project on television and film adaptations of Munro's stories, this article follows two published articles. The first (2018a) offers a close reading of *Away from Her* by Sarah Polley, which focuses on the discourse on senile dementia in the short story and in the film. A second article (2018b) examines the adapted film *Hateship Loveship* by American director Liza Johnson, concentrating on how letters and the exchange of letters function in the adaptation. The next work will concentrate on Pedro Almodovar's adaptation of Julieta's Trilogy from the collection *Runaway*, with a focus on the transcodification of the language of colour. Rather than being filtered through the simplistic and biased lens of a fidelity discourse, these cinematographic narratives are acknowledged as other, distinct, independent stories generated by Munro's storytelling impulse, by the story(re-)telling tension inherent in her narrative.

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