

# The Scandal of Misprision: Alice Munro on Screen. “The Bear Came over the Mountain” and *Away from Her*

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I would like to begin this essay with a reference to a title from a chapter by Derrida in *La dissémination*. This title is “L’écrit, l’écran, l’écrin”, a title which deserves to be spoken aloud because of the alliteration it creates (an alliteration which mimics and triplicates that of the English word “screen”) but which deserves above all to be read because of the word it embeds. Through Derrida’s purposeful highlighting in capital letters of some of the final vowels and consonants, the word “TAIN” is allowed to surface. It translates in English as silvering or coating and refers to the sort of metal covered with liquid mercury to be found on the reverse side of a mirror. Of this coating, Derrida says that it constitutes a screen: it shelters and it conceals at the same time, it holds in reserve and it exposes to view, thus it also constitutes a case, a box: *un écrin*. The definition that Derrida provides for a screen is based on this fundamental duality between *écrin* and *écran*: «at once the visible projection surface for images and that which prevents one from seeing the other side» (Derrida 1972: 350; my translation). Derrida also suggests that the structure of this screen mirror, this *tain*, entails that «it gives itself out as something that must be broken, absolutely gone through *en route* to the true source towards which it lures you for a mirror is not a source» (*ibidem*; my translation).

Derrida tells us that to think of a mirror screen is to think about breaking it or going through it, and it is this experience of going through the mirror that I wish to pursue here.

The experience of going through the looking glass is a recurrent one in literature, it is an experience that a number of Alices have gone through, starting with Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and its numerous filmic adaptations, one of the most interesting being arguably *Alice* by Jan Svankmajer, moving to Lisa Genova's *Still Alice* and finally to Alice Munro, whose fugitive female characters seem to be embarked on a journey of constant deterritorialisation. We find one such journey in her story entitled "The Bear Came over the Mountain" first published in *The New Yorker* (December 27, 1999 and January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2000) before it was anthologized under the same title in her tenth collection of stories, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* in 2001 and adapted for the cinema, to great acclaim, by Sarah Polley in 2006 under a different, shorter title extracted from the text: *Away From Her*. I would like to concentrate first on the differences between the short story title and the film title because they indicate axiological positions which are opposite and testify to opposite interpretations of the story

The short story title gives evidence of transemioticity because it alludes to a well-known song from North American Folklore. The song is entitled "The Bear Went over the Mountain":

The bear went over the mountain,  
The bear went over the mountain,  
The bear went over the mountain,  
To see what he could see.

And what do you think he saw?  
And what do you think he saw?

The other side of the mountain,  
The other side of the mountain,  
The other side of the mountain,  
Was all that he could see.

This Folk Song reads like a morphological pun, a self-parodic play on words, which relies on the opening up of expectations only to frustrate curiosity with the platitude of a tautological closure. Because of its contradictory relationship with language, I have elsewhere tried to demonstrate the hypothesis that Munro's recuperation of the folksong in her title "The Bear Came over the Mountain" belonged in the tradition of Nonsense as evidenced in the writings of Lewis Carroll and Lear, and that, like Nonsense, it constituted a logician's entertainment which explores the limits but also the redeeming possibilities of language<sup>1</sup>.

In this article, where I intend to demonstrate first that the story title is in complete opposition to the film title, I wish to emphasize the refusal to yield to emotion or become a prey to a sense of pain. This restraint and spelling out of ordinariness in the story title stands in sharp contrast to the sentimentality of the film title. In *Away from her* there is the sense of a melodramatic parting which is heart-wrenching. In the short story title, on the contrary, expression is reduced to tautology, and tautology discourages melodrama. The other side of the mountain is the other side of the mountain. The assertion is extremely sensible at the same time as it refrains from conveying any type of supplementary information, interpretation or judgement. It confirms the real world, the existence of which is clearly posited: the other side of the mountain exists and the bear has been able to find its location which is to be accepted as part and parcel of the real world, but this real world is simultaneously questioned because it is reduced to a self-parodic play on words. The anthropomorphic bear indulges in a quest which reveals its self-referential dimension: instead of killing the serpent or marrying the king's daughter, it comes up against "the other side of the mountain" that is to say a self-reflexive textual construction which is the result of the constraints of a particular fiction or self-parodic verse. The literal-mindedness of Nonsense reinforces its fictional dimension, its being

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<sup>1</sup> See – Héliane Ventura, "The Skald and the Goddess: A reading of 'The Bear Came over the Mountain' by Alice Munro", *The Short Stories of Alice Munro*, *Journal of the Short Story in English* 55 (Autumn 2010): 173-185.

circumscribed by allusions to itself or to other texts. Munro multiplies the indexes of fictionality in her own fiction and the title is a case in point.

In her adaptation for the screen, Sarah Polley has discarded the allusion to Folklore. Her own title, *Away from Her*, is taken directly from the male character's discourse in the story, but it is a truncated version of it. The sentence in the story reads: «He wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life» (Munro 2001: 275). The story sentence spells out desire, the film title spells out distress. The title of the short story is a reference to a pun on words, which diminishes the corrosive nature of the subject matter that is so say dementia; the title of the film is close to despair and reinforces the pathetic nature of the disease described. Through the intersemiotic recourse to folksong, the short story tries to eliminate the differences between one side of the mountain and the other that is to say it allusively undermines the differences between the world of sanity and the world of senility.

By discarding the title, the film discards the major trick used by Munro to reconfigure the story of Fiona and Grant: as such it gives evidence of what I have called in my own title the scandal of misprision. By this, I do not mean that Sarah Polley's transfer from page to screen is a "tampering", "an interference", "a violation", "a betrayal", "a deformation", "a perversion" or "a desecration"<sup>2</sup>. I mean that her transmedial performance is a misreading or a misprision which can be regarded as having felicitous OR infelicitous results according to the specific axiological code each viewer and reader applies to both works. Harold Bloom went as far as suggesting, as early as 1982, that strong misprision is the hallmark of a canonical interpretation:

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<sup>2</sup> These words are listed by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). «In Robert Stam's vivid terms: "infidelity resonates with overtones of Victorian prudishness; betrayal evokes ethical perfidy; deformation implies aesthetic disgust, violation calls to mind sexual violation; vulgarization conjures up class degradation; and desecration intimates a kind of religious sacrilege towards the sacred word (2000: 54)». (Hutcheon 2006: 85)

A strong poem, which alone can become canonical for more than a single generation, can be defined as a text that must engender strong misreadings, both as other poems and as literary criticism. Texts that have single, reductive, simplistic meanings are themselves already necessarily weak misreadings of anterior texts. When a strong misreading has demonstrated its fecundity by producing other strong misreadings across several generations, we can and must accept its canonical status. (Bloom 1982: 285)

We do not have the necessary distance from either Munro's text or Polley's film to assess the forcefulness of the misreadings (mine included) that have been operated. However, we can resort to the concept of "intersemiotic translation" as derived from Jakobson to try and assess the type of intermedial strategies both the writer and the film director have used<sup>3</sup>.

Take Munro first, since her work is the source text. In her story, she introduces allusions to other stories – mainly Icelandic stories – with a particular emphasis on one specific text: the *Head Ransom* by Snorri Sturluson, which conspicuously speaks about the redeeming power of poetry; but she also makes allusions to visual material. Grant offers Fiona a book about Iceland: «a book of nineteenth-century watercolours made by a lady traveller to Iceland» (Munro 299). This is a book I have not been able to identify but Munro seems to be performing an extremely tricky and clandestine literary allusion with this unspecified reference. She presents this book as Grant's response to the interest Fiona has displayed for Iceland. Fiona is of Icelandic descent and she is said to have read about William Morris's trip to Iceland but never to have travelled there herself. It so happens that at the time when William Morris took his first trip to Iceland in 1871, he found himself in a situation which is very much akin to Grant's. He had been married with Jane Burden for twelve years and his wife was having a liaison with Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Morris believed that emotions had to be

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<sup>3</sup> "Intersemiotic translation (IT) or transmutation" is «an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of non verbal sign system» (Jakobson 1959: 233).

followed where they might lead, but the affair pained him. Nevertheless, he rented an Elizabethan house by the Thames, Kelmscott manor in Oxfordshire in joint tenancy with Dante Gabriel Rossetti in part that Rossetti could pursue his affair with Jane. By leaving for Iceland, Morris left his wife and his friend to live together in Kelmscott (see Prichard Henderson).

No literary allusion in a work of art is innocent and the coincidence between the similarity of Grant's fate bearing witness to his wife's attachment to Aubrey and Morris leaving his house to his rival is not fortuitous. Through the screened literary allusion deposited in the silvering of her mirror-screen, Munro performs a complex act of metaleptic expansion of an original kernel. The painful but fictional betrayal performed by Fiona is reconfigured in a larger frame of historical and mythological references to adultery. Around the twentieth century fictional figure of Fiona are suggestively evoked the passionate real lives of the pre-Raphaelites, whose main source of inspiration were the Middle Ages and the Arthurian legends in which adultery occupies pride of place. Adultery is logically necessary to the whole notion of *amour courtois* and constitutes its foundation. With the allusion to Morris's trip to Iceland, and the name that she attributes to her heroine whose mother was Icelandic, Munro is even going further back into the history of adultery since she suggestively uses onomastics to remind us of the ancient goddess of love, Freya, a goddess who, in keeping with Venus and Aphrodite, is famous for her wanton amorous conduct. Thus, with a single apparently contingent allusion to a book of watercolours made by a lady traveller to Iceland, Munro conjures up endless metaleptic ramifications which may naturally be carried even further since she opens wide the gates for interpretation.

The only completed easel painting that William Morris produced is called "La Belle Iseult." It is a portrait from 1858 of Jane Burden in medieval dress. As highlighted by Frances Fowle: «The picture has been identified in the past as *Queen Guenevere*, partly owing to the fact that Morris published his first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere*, in March 1858. However, recent research has established convincingly that the picture is intended to represent Iseult mourning Tristan's exile from

the court of King Mark» (Fowle2000). The clandestine references to Guinevere and Iseult clearly tie in with the situation Fiona finds herself in. She is married to Grant in the same way Guinevere is married to King Arthur, and Iseult to King Mark, but she is courted by Aubrey as they are by Tristan and Lancelot.

Through this deployment of latent references related to the lives of emblematic characters in the history of British Arts in the 19th century and directly connected to Grant and Fiona's circumstances, there is little doubt that Munro is playing with a screen that is very much like a *tain*: it holds in reserve and it exposes to view the similarities between the personal lives of ordinary characters in twentieth century Canada and those of eminent artists and thinkers in Victorian Britain. Munro conflates places, telescopes time, fuses characters.

Through this highly duplicitous mirror effect, she broadens the scope of her enquiry into infinity because the superimposition of a twentieth century fiction upon a nineteenth century reality erases the frontiers between personal history, collective history and myth. Munro historicizes fiction and fictionalizes reality and she also mythologizes everyday life. She transforms the senile wife of a retired Canadian academic from a peripheric university into a pre-Raphaelite Muse, who herself successively embodies the legendary wives of the most celebrated kings in the Medieval history of the Western world.

The process of reconfiguration of the self through the ages has been completely by-passed by Canadian criticism and seems to have been equally disregarded by Sarah Polley. Polley discards the allusion to the American folksong in the title, she dismisses the allusions to British Pre-Raphaelite painters, and the Western concept of courtly love they evidenced in their Medieval paintings; she also disregards the reference that is made in Munro's story to the *Head Ransom* by Snorri Sturluson, in the same way she disregards the allusion to the book of watercolours by the lady traveller to Iceland. Instead of references to the United States, Britain or Iceland, she makes marked references to Canada and Canadian writers, with for example a shot on the cover of the book by Alistair McCleod *No Great Mischief*, and a scene in which Grant reads to Fiona a poem by Michael Ondaatje, "The Cinnamon

Peeler's Wife". In Polley's adaptation, the transvaluation of values performed by Munro has been almost completely dismissed to the benefit of the inscription of Canadianness. The short story eliminates references to Canada, the film is rooted in Canada, with Canadian flags sprouting up on screen.

Despite this major misprision of Munro's desire to universalize her setting and her story, the type of adaptation performed by Polley, which is also based on transmediality, paradoxically captures some of the very same universality achieved by Munro. Within her filmic frame Polley introduces references to novels and poems and even non-filmic images. More specifically she introduces drawings which can be either pen or pencil or ink or charcoal or conté crayon drawings. I am first indebted to Sandro Bernardi from the University of Florence for pointing out this major intersemiotic translation and, starting from his own interpretation of the drawings, and the felicity of their inclusion, I would like to try and tie together Munro and Polley's strategies.

Bernardi compares two types of images Polley has used to conjure up a portrait of Fiona: the filmic image of Fiona when she was a young girl and the drawings that Aubrey produces of her in the retirement home. Bernardi suggests that the drawings are more authentic than the filmic images because they allow the unconscious to begin to express itself. The drawings, according to him, allow the return of the repressed in a manner that is worthy of Freud's Gradiva. I subscribe to this interpretation but I also think that the filmic image displays a certain amount of latency and I would like to link both the filmic images and the drawings to Warburg's concept of *Nachleben*. In *L'Image Survivante Histoire de l'Art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Didi Huberman alludes to the mythopoeic power that is encapsulated in images and he reminds us of their primitive and pagan efficacy. Quoting Edgar Wind, he tells us that «all attempt at suppressing the link that image has with religion and poetry, with cult and drama is like draining it of its lifeblood» (Wind quoted by Didi-Huberman 2002: 50; my translation). Images are iconic: liturgical. They belong in church ritual. They make us enter another temporality, that of *Nachleben*, or *Nachleben der Antike*, a formula which summarizes the warburgian enterprise in its link with



traces and imprints and the resurgence in actuality of a far removed past.

By endowing Aubrey with a talent to draw, Sarah Polley surprisingly echoes the screened Morris-Rosetti-Burden configuration which had remained latent in Munro's story as if she had unconsciously taken into account the role of muse that Munro had attributed to Fiona and as if she wanted to articulate what Munro had left unspoken. In an even more surprising manner, at the same time, as Polley makes room for the unconscious resurgence of a screened allusion, she allows the more individual past to surface again. Aubrey has known Fiona when she was a young girl, and the portrait he draws of her now harks back to the time when she was fifty years younger. The portrait conflates the woman of today whose face is lined and wrinkled with the young girl whose hair was gently dancing in the wind.

Warburg borrows from Richard Semon the concept of *engramme d'énergie* to articulate the idea that every event which affects the human being deposits a trace in his memory, a trace called "engramme" which he describes as the reproduction of an original (Didi-Huberman 2002: 241). Fiona's face today bears the trace of the original young girl Aubrey fell in love with but it also bears the trace of the goddess of love whose name is embedded in hers through paronomasia. Fiona is the reproduction of Freya, the Norse goddess of love, and there is a haunting quality in the image drawn by Aubrey. The dancing girl of yesteryear beckons to us in the same way she does in the filmic image of the elderly Fiona. Of the elderly Fiona looking at Grant, Munro says: «She stared at him for a moment as if waves of wind had come beating into her face. Into her face, into her head, pulling everything to rags» (Munro 2001: 284). Dementia and the process of aging dislocate and destroy Fiona's integrity, but there remains in her look a formula of pathos, the memory of Ninfa, of Gradiva, of Freya; there is a rhythm of recurrence, a dynamogram from antiquity that returns in contemporaneity, there is an anachronic *contretemps* which is not the return of the same but embodies the very principle of returning. Deleuze says: «Dans l'expression éternel retour nous faisons un contresens quand nous comprenons retour du même. Ce n'est pas l'être

qui revient, mais le revenir lui-même constitue l'être en tant qu'il s'affirme du devenir et de ce qui passe. Ce n'est pas l'un qui revient, mais le revenir lui-même est l'un qui s'affirme du divers ou du multiple» (Deleuze 1962: 54-55).

The multiplicity of being which is asserted through the principle of return finds a surprising illustration both in Munro's text and in Polley's adaptation. I would go as far as saying that in the visual and textual portraits of Fiona that are given to us, the return of the repressed or the return of Antiquity has to be understood literally. It is not only the Goddess Freya, the Venus of the North, who returns under the emaciated traits of the elderly woman; it is perhaps the phantom of the Valkyrie Brunhild herself. Brunhild has exchanged solemn vows with Sigurd, but Sigurd has drunk a philter and forgotten the fierce virgin to whom he was betrothed. He has broken his vow and married Gudrun which eventually unleashes Brunhild's despair, furor and destruction. Through a screen mirror filled with latent and inverted images, it is possible that both writer and film director have unknowingly and unwittingly provided their readership and spectatorship with the female inverted version of Sigurd. Like the Norse hero, Fiona has drunk the bitter philter of a degenerative disease and she has forgotten her vows. She has reached that point of oblivion when the fact of being married to Grant has escaped her, but she has not married Aubrey and she is not destroying everything around her. Unlike the heroine from the Icelandic Saga, Fiona is simply trying to repair her grammar: «You could have just driven away» she said; «Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me; Forsaken». Unwittingly or unknowingly, both Polley and Munro seem to assert the reparative dimension of language. They mix together the positive ending of the *Head Ransom*, in which the skaldic poet is saved because of the beauty of his verse, and the negative ending of the Volsung saga, in which a broken vow leads to destruction by fire, to provide us in the end with an ambivalent and ironic vision of love the redeemer conjoined to love the destroyer, both surfacing through the silvering of the inverted and transformative mirror that Munro holds up to nature.

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