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From “Flowery Expression” to Floral Motif:
Adapting Discordant Narration
in Sarah Polley’s *Away from Her*

Abstract: In her film *Away from Her*, Sarah Polley subtly transforms the discordant (ideologically-unreliable) narration of its source text, Alice Munro’s “The Bear Came over the Mountain.” Given the challenges discordant narration poses for film adaptation, this essay examines how Polley repurposes several elements present in Munro’s story, few of which participate in its narration, and consolidates them into a system of cues that undermine the audience’s sympathy with the protagonist, thus performing a role equivalent to though technically and rhetorically different from Munro’s use of discordance; the most important of these cues constitute the film’s floral motif. Overall, Polley’s adaptation of discordant narration translates aspects of fictive discourse (*sujet*) into cinematic content (*fabula*), a shift that is hypothesized to be common in film adaptations of fiction featuring discordant narrators. More generally, Polley’s adaptive manoeuvres illustrate how adaptations can foreground narratological problems and focus theoretical attention on the role of specific narrative elements within and across medial environments. How her film adapts the discordance of Munro’s story, mobilizing the ethical and political functions of discordance across contexts, media and discursive forms, endorses the continued use of narratology in the study of adaptation and, furthermore, suggest that Adaptation Studies could help clarify and further our understanding of core concepts in narratology.

Keywords: discordant narration, film adaptation, cinematic unreliability, feminist narratology, Alice Munro, Sarah Polley.

Bouquet in hand, Grant arrives at the Meadowlake Retirement Facility to visit his wife Fiona, who has checked in with early signs of dementia. He and his flowers are intercepted by a staff member: “Wow. Narcissus this early,”

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she says. "You must have spent a fortune" (Munro 292; Polley 46.92).¹ At a literal level, these lines indicate admiration for Grant's uxoriousness, though the patronizing tone is evident. But the implication is not far to seek: the daffodils (*Narcissus*), linking Grant's gift to mythology and psychoanalysis, cast an ironic shadow over his motives and personality.

The lines quoted above echo identically from Alice Munro's "The Bear Came over the Mountain" (1999) to Sarah Polley's film adaptation, *Away from Her* (2006)—unsurprisingly, since dialogue transfers easily across media. Of course the similarities are imperfect: Munro supplies the words and a speech tag attributing them to the nurse Kristy; the film adds voices, a soundtrack, and moving images of Grant, "flowers held awkwardly in his hands" (46.92). Such additions are inevitable results of changing media. But the film also includes a change all the more intriguing for being *unnecessary*: no longer spoken by Kristy, whose role is otherwise expanded in the film, the words are delivered by the oleaginous, condescending and "prim looking supervisor" Madeleine Montpellier (Polley 27.53), a minor character mentioned only twice as "the supervisor" by Munro (284).

If the difference was not inevitable, it must be a part of Polley's design. Indeed, the contextual shift surrounding the daffodil comment signals a systemic change in Grant's character as he moves from story to film. In Munro's story, Kristy is sufficient and appropriate as the mouth-piece for the subtle imputation against Grant: she plays the rhetorical counterpoint to the story's unusual third-person discordant narrator (Cohn "Discordant Narration") who validates and valorises Grant's perspective at the expense of Fiona and other women. Kristy in the story articulates authorial norms by exposing Grant's narcissism and misogyny. Because discordance is difficult to render cinematically (Stam *Literature through Film* 232), keeping the *Narcissus* comment requires a series of far-reaching adaptations, including promoting Montpellier's character. Like any filmmaker striving to retain the rhetorical effects of discordance without using discordant narration itself, Polley develops compensatory strategies that enable her film to retain elements of the source text even when the cinematic medium discourages their direct intermedial transfer.

If film cannot (possibly or practically) accommodate a narrative element, how might filmmakers seeking to retain its *effects* compensate for its loss? How they achieve such compensations is revealing, not only about specific adaptations but also about adaptation generally—and about narrative. This problem takes centre stage in some adaptations, in the 99 retellings of one anecdote in Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de Style* (1947), for example, or in Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002); in most adaptations the issue arises implicitly, which can be just as interesting.

Such vast considerations underwrite my study of how *Away from Her* adapts the discordant narration that is central to the feminist ethics of "The Bear Came over the Mountain." In his study of fidelity and adaptation in Polley's film, Robert McGill suggests that "among the departures that *Away from Her* makes from Munro's story

are ones that speak to their own adaptive infidelities and to the challenges of artistic adaptation more broadly" ("No Nation but Adaptation" 100). Here, then, I review the challenges that unreliability poses for film adaptation (Stam "Introduction" 38) in order to show how Polley finds creative ways of retaining, by alternative means, the ethical thrust of discordant narration. How Polley circumvents the problem of discordant narration in order to approximate the ethics and ideology of Munro's story reveals a lot about the narrational and political commitments of two texts, both alone and in interrelation. By exemplifying how the film adapts Munro's use of discordance, her adaptive strategies also more broadly showcase how the study of adaptations can help advance the study of narratives and the methods of narratology.

Discordant Narration and Film

Discordant narration, a term coined by Dorrit Cohn (2000), isolates "evaluative" (Thon 4) or "normative unreliability" (Alber 172) from other types of narration often included under the broad mantle of *unreliability*. Discordance is common enough in fiction, where it is a "function" of verbal irony (Olson 95), but its very possibility in film is debated. What is typically recognized as cinematic unreliability involves not distorted values and norms but, rather, withheld or misleading information, often in service of a plot twist. Such is the unreliability in films like *The Usual Suspects*, whose surprise endings alter or problematize, in retrospect, what the foregoing narrative had hitherto presented as true. This kind of unreliability entails misreporting information, occurring mainly along what James Phelan calls "the axis of facts" and/or "the axis of knowledge and perception" (34), as opposed to discordance, which falls along "the axis of ethics" (34). While discordant narration functions on the basis of shared normative understanding between audience and authorial intention (however this intention is theorized), cinematic unreliability predominantly involves the audience's exclusion from knowing the "real" facts until the moment of revelation. Discordant narration is a specific manifestation of "verbal irony," which, as Linda Hutcheon notes, "presents a particular challenge for adaptation to performance media, not in dialogue, obviously, but when used in the showing mode" (71). Discordant narration, specifies Cohn, "must be told by a narrator who audibly proclaims his or her subjective opinions" ("Discordant Narration" 307), through and against which authorial norms reach the audience. The necessary conditions are unmet when audiences are simply encouraged "to draw incorrect inferences about the story world" (Ferenz 137), which can be done, as in cases of unreliable reporting, without an opinionated or otherwise biased narrator. Discordance requires that these *potential* "incorrect inferences" give the reader cues to an alternative or opposing message concealed between the lines.

Is discordance possible in film? Critics sensitive to the crucial distinction between misreporting and discordance, including Emily Anderson and Jean-Noël Thon, prefer not to deny this possibility. But it is telling that, in practice, Anderson limits her discussion of cinematic unreliability to "films that mislead the viewer by

underreporting the story, and films that lie to the viewer by misreporting the story" (84), while Thon acknowledges that "unreliable evaluation of storyworld elements ... is not as easily realized" as unreliable reporting (171). This practice reflects the films upheld as notable cases of cinematic unreliability, such as *Fight Club*, *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense*, whose unreliability is factual/perceptual rather than normative. Returning to *The Usual Suspects*, what ethical stance could we possibly read between the lines of Roger Kint/Keyser Söze's narration? The point of discordance is to assert, through ironic inversion, a definite polemic or set of values, and though there are certainly ethical implications to the radical doubt instilled by the film's twist ending, Kint/Söze's narration does *not* conceal *The Usual Suspects'* alternative values. Meanwhile, films adapted from fiction with a discordant narrator, such as Kubrick's *Lolita*, *The Remains of the Day* and *Forrest Gump*, tend to dispense with discordance in favour of other, non-narrational forms of irony.

Uncertainties about the possibility of cinematic discordance reflect the controversial constitution, function and even existence of the cinematic narrator. While unreliable reporting can be effected with or without an anthropomorphic teller, discordant narration as a form of verbal irony requires such a narrator. It is therefore harder to conceive of in certain media, "such as cartoon or film," where "the existence of a narrator and the description of the 'text' as the utterance by that narrator become less convincing propositions" (Fludernik "Mediacy, Mediation, and Focalization" 119–20). Even in cases of character-narration, which is most conducive to cinematic unreliability (Ferenz 135; Alber 172), it is unclear whether discordance is possible because, as Jason Mittell indicates, "even a film that has an explicit 'narrator' conveying the story via voice-over is rarely positioned as the agent behind the images and sounds that unfold in the film" (42). The complex constitution of cinematic presentation accounts for the fact, identified by Stam, that "the discursive power of unreliable autodiegetic narrators is almost automatically relativized by film," not least because "other characters instantly gain a physical presence denied them in the novel," while "the narrator/character from the novel is also relativized through contextualization," competing with "the other characters but also with the décor the music, the color, the light" (*Literature through Film* 232).

Jan Alber has sought to circumvent this argument by suggesting that cinematic presentation is discordant if it is attributable to a discordant character-narrator (169). For viewers, he writes, there is no distinction between cinematic presentation and character-narration, so we can treat the character-narration and the cinematic presentation as one and the same: "since what we see is what we hear, most viewers attribute both the spoken words and the resulting images to the character-narrator.... [T]here is no need for the concept of the film narrator in these cases.... The character-narrator is unreliable and this is clearly what we are supposed to realize" (172n17).

Satisfying as it is, this argument is complicated in an adaptation context, where conflating character-narration with narrative presentation is problematic. Even if

the conflation is defensible when a film is considered on its own, it is much less so when the film adapts a verbal narrative; in a verbal narrative, it would be at best misguided to conflate narrator with narrative. In such conditions, how could a viewer read between the lines of the narration and uncover (and agree with) an alternative point of view? In such conditions, it may be preferable not to force narrational homologies between media when each medium might be better explained by their own taxonomies. For Jonas Koch, indeed, the lack of “complete analogy” between literary and cinematic unreliability results in profound theoretical confusions, which might be avoided if existing cinematic typology of “false plants, false alarms, red herrings, hanging ends, blind motives, fakes and hoaxes” were developed to cover what is currently often termed unreliability (77). The non-equivalence of narrational frameworks in fiction versus film has important theoretical and practical implications for adaptation, beyond debates about the possibility of discordant narration in film.

Cinematic narration, at best an imperfect analogue of literary narration (Thomson-Jones), offers no obvious mechanism for replicating the conditions that produce discordance in fiction. Denying the possibility of cinematic discordance may be “overly reductive,” as Thon argues (171), but seems clear that actually adapting discordant narration saddles filmmakers with significant technical and rhetorical difficulties. These difficulties affect the adaptation’s meaning and politics because discordance is always central to the ethics and ideology of the narrative at hand. Discordant narration deployed for incidental or superficial ends is an oxymoron. Other devices or techniques, say analepsis, can arguably play incidental roles in a narrative’s production, reception and adaptation; discordance serves a polemical purpose that is inseparable from the given narrative’s *raison d’être*.

The essential role discordance plays in a fictional narrative makes the difficulties of adapting it a technical problem but also an opportunity for creativity and innovation. “The challenge ... in adapting unreliable narration,” notes Stam, “is to somehow reproduce the hermeneutic mechanisms of textual ambiguity and readerly decipherment found in the novels, but on a distinct, cinematic register” (“Introduction” 38). *Away from Her* presents an intriguing test case because it does exactly that: it attempts to find a cinematic equivalent to the story’s discordant narration. The stakes are high because Munro’s use of discordance is central to her story’s feminism; “The Bear Came over the Mountain” is thus one of those cases where “unreliable narration ... can produce insight into the gendered nature of human [moral] blindness, exposing the distorted grids through which some men see women as only traitors or victims” (Stam *Literature through Film* 191). Polley’s adaptive strategies are not straightforward, however, and they reveal a lot about the film and its relations to its source text.

Discordance in "The Bear Came over the Mountain"

"The Bear Came over the Mountain" and *Away from Her* tell the story of Grant, a man in his 70s whose wife Fiona enters Meadowlake after exhibiting early symptoms of dementia. When Grant is allowed to visit her after an obligatory month's separation, Fiona has formed a relationship with fellow patient Aubrey and treats her husband with at best amused tolerance. Both story and film hint that she may know what she is doing, perhaps to punish Grant for his infidelities years before, when he was a university professor. When Aubrey's wife Marian takes him home, Fiona is devastated and her decline accelerates. In what seems to be self-sacrifice, Grant exhorts Marian to reunite Aubrey and Fiona; Marian initially refuses but relents after she and Grant begin a relationship. Grant brings Aubrey to Fiona, only to find that she now recognizes him (Grant) again, asking to be taken home and not to be "forsaken" (Munro 327).

The differences between story and film include the film's emphasis on a Canadian setting, references to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, expanded roles for Kristy and Marian, greater use of anachrony, and a rather dissimilar portrayal of Grant. The shift in Grant's character is connected to what I see as the greatest difference between story and film, which is tonal. *Away from Her* is elegiac, though leavened with jokes, compassionate portrayals of aging but vital characters, charismatic performances, and even a sexual gag. The story is, characteristically for Munro, tonally and morally more ambiguous, its registers ranging less widely and never far from irony.

If the tonal difference can be correlated with any aspect of the plot, it is with the story's and the film's differential treatment of Grant's sacrifice. In *Away from Her* the decision to reunite Aubrey and Fiona is presented mainly as a noble gift in favour of Fiona's health and happiness. In Munro's story the sacrifice is more equivocal. Concern for Fiona is undoubtedly his motive for asking Marian to let Aubrey return to Fiona, but the sacrifice is *achieved*, in a passage of focalized narration that betrays Grant's scheming, by leveraging Marian's loneliness so that she will do his bidding. Any redemption he might find is therefore inseparable from the implication that he has scored a point against Fiona and Aubrey and, as a bonus, scored himself a new lover. In contrast with Polley's romanticized final scene, which depicts Grant and Fiona embracing as the camera whirls around them, Munro offers a vivid olfactory image that draws the reader into empathetic recoil, along with Grant, away from Fiona and her aging body: "She ... stood up and lifted her arms to put them around him. Her skin or her breath gave off a faint new smell, a smell that seemed to Grant like green stems in rank water" (327). The odour of vegetal rot might be characterized as unflinching realism on the part of a dispassionate narrator; in fact, it is the last of many moral-inflected floral references that pepper the story, acting collectively as its strongest signal of discordant narration.

Popular wisdom restricts the use of discordant narration to first-person narratives, a view apparently endorsed by Monika Fludernik's claim that "only first-person

narrators can be properly unreliable" (*Towards a "Natural" Narratology* 159). Yet Fludernik adds a crucial caveat: "authorial narrators, when untrustworthy, acquire a personalized status that puts them in the same category with projected observer positions or reflectorized teller figures" (*Towards a "Natural" Narratology* 159). A figural narrator can acquire the status of character, including a character's vulnerability to authorial irony; thus "reflectorization of the authorial narrator" can be read as "the narrator's taking on the personality (linguistic and ideological) of a character" (Fludernik *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* 135). If that narrator is connected through tight focalization to a particular character in the storyworld, as is the case in "The Bear Came over the Mountain," then that character's untrustworthy perceptions become, for all intents and purposes, the narrator's discordance.

Critics tend to read Munro's story as a case of figural narration featuring double vision, as if the narrator ironized Grant's thoughts and perceptions even as he reported them. "Munro's story," writes Sue Thornham, "is focalized through Grant, whose betrayals and self-justifications are weighed through the distancing irony in the narrative voice" (132). Similarly Robert McGill argues that "this focalization happens so pervasively and so subtly, with Grant's thoughts often not explicitly tagged as his, that readers might be drawn into accepting Grant's way of seeing things as authoritative rather than highly subjective and problematic" ("Mistaken Identities" 84). Yet "The Bear Came over the Mountain" never differentiates Grant from the narrator, as far as values are concerned. Its third-person narrator is so tightly and consistently entwined with Grant that the narration amounts to reported monologue, free indirect discourse without discernible double vision. Without the "distancing irony" that double vision often gives to figural narration (e.g. James's *Daisy Miller*, Larsen's *Passing*), the narrator of "The Bear Came over the Mountain" is complicit with the focalizer and thus lumped in ideological error with Grant; as Cohn would put it, the story's narrator, "far from being conceived as the author's mouthpiece, is an expressly and artfully created vocal organ whose ideology clashes with his or her tale" ("Discordant Narration" 307). In terms of ethics and values, then, the third-person figural narration in Munro's story *might as well be* in the first person, and since the third-person narrator is so complicit with Grant's first-person perspective, which clashes with the text's norms, the third-person narrator is discordant.

Yet the narrator is not Grant, whose perceptions and thoughts are always evidently mediated by a distinct teller. If the narrator and Grant are ideologically indistinguishable, they are plainly distinct narrative entities, a distinction maintained through various deictic and grammatical markers, notably the narrator's use of the preterite third-person masculine pronoun.² This distinction is crucial because it lends to Grant's suspect values a deceptive veneer of narratorial authority, thereby concealing and strengthening the narrator and Grant's ideological complicity. This deceptively-independent narrator allows Munro to challenge misogyny not only in

Grant as one individual character but in the more network of complicity that links individual men to communities and, more broadly, the dominant voices of Society.

Several examples from Munro's story demonstrate how the third-person narrator discordantly foregrounds an ideology of male victimhood at the hands of feminine guile, inconsistency and inconstancy, while allowing hints of an opposing or complicating feminist rebuttal to shine through. A former university professor, Grant is well served by a narrator who consistently minimizes his agency in his history of adultery with students, as well as the seriousness of those relationships. Grant, as the narrator presents him, was the passive recipient of his students' desires and the victim of their emotional blackmail. These women, the narrator notes, "worked with a will and brought into his office, into his regulated, satisfactory life, the great surprising bloom of their mature female compliance, their tremulous hope of approval" (305). Thus he passively moves from lover to lover, dismissing one "while he became magically and unexpectedly involved with a girl who was young enough to be her daughter" (305).

These symptoms of sexual selfishness correlate with Grant's general impercipient and dismissal concerning women's lives and points of view. In a revealing passage the narrator reports "the discovery that [Fiona] was not likely to have children. Something about her tubes being blocked, or twisted—Grant could not remember now. He had always avoided thinking about all that female apparatus" (283). Reading an accusatory letter from a woman (in a dream), Grant finds "its style ... sanctimonious and hostile, threatening in a whining way—he put the writer down as a latent lesbian" (288). Such categories, which help Grant classify and dismiss women's psychology, fail him when Marian refuses to go along with his plan. Her behaviour eludes his categories: "he had thought that all he'd have to contend with would be a woman's natural sexual jealousy—or her resentment, the stubborn remains of sexual jealousy. He had not had any idea of the way she might be looking at things" (321). He had "expected a different sort of wife. A flustered homebody, pleased by an unexpected visit and flattered by a confidential tone" (314), and not someone who would "be good in a crisis. Good at survival, able to scrounge food and *able to take the shoes off a dead body in the street*" (322, emphasis added). The ability to steal shoes from a corpse may reveal a certain *savoir-faire*, but coming from Grant's disappointed perspective the compliment is at best back-handed.

Linked to his reductive view of female psychology is the contempt and objectification palpable in Grant's use of bodily flaws to score points against women. Just after Kristy comments on Grant's bouquet of daffodils (292), the narrator strikes back on his behalf: "She was a heavy young woman who looked as if she had given up in every department except her hair. That was blond and voluminous. All the puffed-up luxury of a cocktail waitress's style, or a stripper's, on top of such a workaday face and body" (292). A university friend of Fiona is dismissed as "the little hollow-chested, black-eyed girl, who was probably dead by now" (293). Similarly

derisive are descriptions of Marian, with her “trim waist and wide buttocks” that “bulged out considerably above and below” her belt and her “many wrinkles” (313). Marian, the narrator later notes, is “appetizing enough, with her choice breasts. The fussy way she had of shifting her buttocks on the kitchen chair, her pursed mouth, a slightly contrived air of menace—that was what was left of the more or less innocent vulgarity of a small-town flirt” (322). Such put-downs are even directed at Fiona—though, tellingly, only after Grant first sees her with Aubrey. Then she appears “a little puffy in the face, the flab on one cheek hiding the corner of her mouth, in a way it hadn’t done before” (293). As if self-protectively he notices “her newly fattened face” (295), her “silly woolly hat and a jacket with swirls of blue and purple, the sort of thing he had seen on local women at the supermarket” (303). In such moments, the tightly-focalized narration appears to cite women’s bodies in their vulnerable, failing or awkward states as a defensive move, designed to insulate Grant from the implication—real or imagined—of selfishness or wrongdoing. Of course a narrator’s unappealing views on women do not necessarily make him discordant; the narration must also betray an alternative set of (authorial) norms.

Munro does this primarily through Kristy, who variously challenges Grant, questioning his assumptions and generally treating him “as if he was a backward child on his first day of school” (292). Kristy’s role as moral counterpoint is almost explicit in a brief but significant revelation, when Grant yearns to ask her for information about Fiona’s condition “but checked himself, to remain in Kristy’s good graces” (287). These good graces are woven through the story: it is Kristy who invites us to doubt Grant’s suspicion that Fiona’s memory loss might be a trick designed to punish him for past indiscretions; when he wonders aloud “whether [Fiona] isn’t putting on some kind of a charade,” Kristy answers simply “A what?” (298). Though this response might serve the narrator’s (and Grant’s) agenda by stressing her lack of erudition, it can also be read as a refusal even to consider Grant’s paranoid suspicions.³ Furthermore the story’s turning-point, when Grant decides to help Fiona by reuniting her with Aubrey, coincides with a change in perspective about Kristy, who, the narrator reports, “was not hard-hearted. During the time he had known her Grant had found out some [difficult] things about her life” (309).

The clearest warning about the narrator’s reliability occurs when he reports how Grant, returning home from one of his conquests, recalls “an absurd and blasphemous quotation” from *Höfuðlausn*, which he had just read to his class to general acclaim:

And so he increased in wisdom and stature—
And in favor with God and man.

That embarrassed him at the time and gave him a superstitious chill. As it did yet. But so long as nobody knew, it seemed not unnatural. (307)

The quotation plainly suggests Grant’s delusions of grandeur, with which the narrator is just as plainly uncritical. The jig is up, however, when the narrator slips: the feeling

may have "seemed not unnatural" "so long as nobody knew," but by expressing it the narrator has made it known and opened it up to our censure. Through this and other more subtle insights into the lives and thoughts of Kristy, Fiona, Marian and even the former female students, Munro's story exposes the limited, misogynistic and self-interested perspective that Grant shares with the narrator. Thus through its discordant narration the story reveals its feminist and empathetic norms.

If Munro wanted to ironize the narrator's special pleading, which is also of course Grant's own self-justifying, why use such an unusual device as third-person figural discordance instead of a more traditional device: either figural narration with double vision, or first-person discordance? My view is that Munro's feminist critique aims at but also beyond Grant himself, linking his individual biases to a larger system of misogyny. Certainly Grant seems intent on differentiating his abuses of male power from those of his peers, whose indiscretions are always, from his perspective, worse than his own. Note how suspect the following passage reads when we recognize how closely the narration limns to Grant's perspective: "Nowhere was there any acknowledgement that the life of a philanderer (if that was what Grant had to call himself—he who had not had half as many conquests or complications as the man who had reproached him in his dream) involved acts of kindness and generosity and even sacrifice... Many times he had catered to a woman's pride, to her fragility, by offering more affection—or a rougher passion—than anything he really felt" (290). When we learn Grant lost his professorship because "the feminists and perhaps the sad silly girl [a student lover of his] and his cowardly so-called friends had pushed him out" (291), but, the narrator reminds us, "Grant himself did not go overboard, at least in comparison with some people around him" (306).

Grant appears quite differently in *Away from Her*, for many reasons. One is simply the shift from a verbal to a visual medium, which, by moving out of Grant's damning thoughts into the world of appearances and interpersonal relations, downplays his egoism in favour of his loneliness, humour, befuddlement and attempts at emotional connection. Polley foregrounds Grant's pathos to a much greater extent than Munro. In the film, Grant is gruff, wounded, charming and witty—qualities easily ascribed to Munro's character but never on display, while stage directions in Polley's screenplay introduce him as "a handsome man in his 70's, with a constant twinkle in his eye" (1.1). Polley's Grant laughs, swears, flirts, stammers and is befuddled trying to zip up his pants in the halls of Meadowlake after making love with Fiona in her new room. That Grant is played by Gordon Pinsent, a handsome actor best known for voicing Babar in a children's cartoon, might contribute to his sympathetic appeal. The atmospheric soundtrack by Jonathan Goldsmith, as well as the use of songs like Neil Young's "Harvest Moon," highlights his nostalgia, regrets and isolation, tilting the audience's sympathy toward him at the expense of the egoistic, even mercenary side we find in the story. A strong hint of redemption inflects Grant's admission that he watches Fiona from a distance because "I've learned to give her a little bit of space.

She's in love with the man she's sitting with. I don't like to disturb her. I just ... like to see her I suppose. I like to make sure that she's doing well" (Polley 71B.121).

Anyway, it is difficult to conceive how Polley could have replicated on film the narratorial dynamics of "The Bear Came over the Mountain," even if she had wanted to. Yet despite its rather endearing depiction of Grant, *Away from Her* is not as forgiving as Amelia De Falco believes when she calls Polley's Grant "an ethical hero" (3) or Marlene Goldman and Sarah Powell when they describe the film's "less complex portrayal of Grant as a classic romantic lead, a changed man who is humbled by the chance to rekindle a romance with his wife" (82-3). The strategies Polley adopts to retain the rhetorical effects of Munro's discordant narration are subtle, but they are also crucial to the film's ethics and politics.

Adapting Discordance in *Away from Her*

"How did they ever make a film of *Lolita*?" asks the poster of Stanley Kubrick's 1962 adaptation of Nabokov's novel, a canonical example of discordant narration. Though marketers were surely alluding to *Lolita*'s salacious content rather than technique, their question reflects the difficulties filmmakers face when adapting discordance. There are many ways to meet that challenge, including ignoring it, but Kubrick's strategy is informative in the context of Polley's related approach.

Kubrick makes little if any effort to recreate, in cinematic language, the technical, rhetorical and ethical features of the novel's discordant narration. Instead, he finds and exploits alternative sources of irony through which the novel undermines Humbert Humbert's actions and ethical norms: other characters' negative assessments or alternative perspectives. Through the novel *Lolita*, for example, Humbert often quotes sarcastic, pained or otherwise revealing words uttered by his victim Dolores, thus exposing the cruelty and exploitation he strives to present as love, care and artistry. Quilty, no angel himself, similarly punctures the bubble of Humbert's solipsism, showing him for what he is: "not an ideal stepfather" but "a beastly pervert" (Nabokov 301, 298). Such dialogue is easier to transfer to film than the subtler means by which Humbert damns himself through his own narration; unsurprisingly, these are the moments Kubrick exploits. His adaptation diverts the novel's ironic energies from the narration, from discourse, into the storyworld, mostly noticeably by greatly expanding the scope of Quilty's role, a strategy discussed in Robert Stam's study of *Lolita*'s adaptations (*Literature through Film* 223-43). Played by Peters Sellers in characteristic style, the clown and trickster Quilty mocks and baffles the solemn, suave Humbert, refuting his self-image as a serious, heroic and sympathetic character and denying his view of his paedophilic obsession as a romantic or tragic love. "Through a kind of displacement from narrative to character," Stam suggests, "Quilty becomes a kind of ambulatory intertext, a performative embodiment of the Nabokovian style" by "incarnating some of the protean, Menippean spirit that animates the novel" (*Literature through Film* 230).

The moral stakes and the techniques at play in "The Bear Came over the Mountain" differ greatly from those of Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Munro's use of discordance is far subtler—it can afford to be, because the moral stakes are less urgent. Yet while they are not identical, the narration-to-storyworld displacements that Kubrick performs to adapt Nabokovian discordance generally resemble the subtle means Polley uses to adapt Munro's own use of discordant narration.

One such means, discussed by Thornham, is "the film's use of space and landscape" as a way to tell "Fiona's story," which "undercuts Grant's careful [and self-serving] mapping of memory, landscape and life" (134, 133). Thus the film's "use of Fiona's voice" becomes its mechanism for delivering "the distancing irony of Munro's narration" (132). Another is the expanded role it gives to characters with comparatively small parts in the story. Though Kristy is the narrative's moral centre in both story and film, how she fulfils this role is interestingly different. Played by Kristen Thompson, the film's Kristy is a picture of dignity—and perkiness—under the pressures of an unrelenting job. Gone is her patronizing tone; indeed, Polley's stage directions specify that Kristy discharges her duties "without condescension" (40.72). This is why I see so much significance in the transfer of "Wow. Narcissus this early" (46.92) from Kristy to Madeleine Montpellier. By reassigning this patronizing comment to Montpellier, Polley morally clarifies Kristy's character, reserving her for the task of countering Grant's perspective; meanwhile, the equally important but less admirable capacity for condescension that characterizes Kristy in the story is offloaded onto Montpellier, who becomes the film's standard-bearer for "insensitivity" (Polley 40.73). It is as if Montpellier were promoted from the minimal and merely-functional role of "the supervisor" in Munro (283) to the more significant role of belittling Grant. The result is a clearer moral function for the film's Kristy, enabling her to serve as Grant's holder to account. When Munro's narrator acknowledges Kristy's difficult life and admits that she is "not hard-hearted" (309), he adds that "to her, Grant and Fiona and Aubrey must seem lucky. They had got through life without too much going wrong" (310). In the film these speculations are uttered aloud, to Kristy: "I suppose our lives must seem easy to you," Grant says. "What we have to suffer, now that we're old hardly counts I suppose. That's what you must think" (80.140). No longer private, Grant's thoughts are now vulnerable to a rebuttal from within the diegesis: "You don't know what I think," answers Kristy; "I'll bet you weren't always the doggedly devoted husband. Am I right? When you said you thought maybe she was punishing you for something. I'll bet maybe you had something pretty specific in mind didn't you?" (80.140). In discordant narration, the narrator damns himself with his own words; in "The Bear Came over the Mountain," the third-person narrator, who is effectively Grant's spokesman, damns Grant along with himself. In *Away from Her*, by contrast, moments such as Kristy's outburst displace that function into the words of other characters.

Polley similarly exploits the poetry of Auden, mentioned once very briefly in Munro's story (304). In the film, Auden's book *Letters from Iceland* is mentioned

repeatedly, and it participates in one of the more touching scenes of Grant caring for Fiona; Polley's use of Auden thus illustrates her adaptation's tonal and ideological departures from Munro's story. In this scene Grant reads Fiona twenty lines from "Letter to R. H. S. Crossman" in *Letters from Iceland*, to console her after Aubrey's departure (74–74A.127). But Auden also plays a very different role: a later episode finds Grant reading the final two stanzas of "Death's Echo" (86, 87.148), an unsettling choice noteworthy for *not* being in *Letters from Iceland*. Like all *carpe diem* poems, "Death's Echo" treads an ambiguous line between inspirational (choosing freedom) and callous (abdicating responsibilities). We recognize Grant in one line, "The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews," and foresee his self-serving tactics with Marian in Death's advice: "The second-best is a formal order, / The dance's pattern; dance while you can" (Auden, qtd in Polley 86.148). More telling still in this context are lines not cited in the scene, yet immediately evoked for those familiar with the poem, an echo of Grant's daffodils and another hint of his egotism:

A friend is the old old tale of Narcissus,
Not to be born is the best for man;
An active partner in something disgraceful,
Change your partner, dance while you can. (Auden 153)

Changing partners and dancing while he can—this cuts close to Grant's wrangling with Marian, even if it is for Fiona's good. His sacrifice is also a gain: his gift to Fiona enables him, if he wishes, to get away from her. The film's inclusion of "Death's Echo," and the intertextual memory of the tantalizing lines quoted above, would therefore appear to serve as the adaptation's counterpart to the most damning passage in Munro's story, and surely one of the most resistant to cinematic representation. In this late passage the narrator reports, with palpable gratification, a shift in power dynamics between Grant and Marian, who has just left an awkward, vulnerable message on his answering machine inviting him to a dance. Grant is pleased to learn he has touched Marian after all, despite her initial standoffishness. Before calling back, then, he secures his power by letting the clock tick as Marian, in his imagination, waits fretfully. "Generally," reports the narrator,

a woman's vulnerability increased as time went on, as things progressed.... It gave him satisfaction—why deny it?—to have brought that out in her.... Anything was possible.... For instance, if he wanted to, would he be able to break her down, get her to the point where she might listen to him about taking Aubrey to Fiona? And not just for a visit but for the rest of Aubrey's life? And what would become of him and Marian after he'd delivered Aubrey to Fiona? (Munro 324)

The reported monologue exploits its inherent ambiguity—the impossibility of distinguishing Grant's perceptions from the narrator's language when, paradoxically, Grant is *not* the narrator. Even if we set aside discordance, such "insensible shading

of narrated monologue into psycho-narration" (Cohn *Transparent Minds* 137) flaunts the presence of ironic disparities even as it blurs irony's edge beyond all confident delineation. Though Grant and narrator are, as noted above, indistinguishable ideologically, they are not identical, and this distinction matters because it is always possible—if impossible to ascertain—that the narrator's and Grant's norms have diverged. As unlikely as it may seem, this possibility dulls what would have amounted to a strong indictment of Grant in other, less ambiguous forms of narration or dialogue. (This situation recalls how the narrator of *Howards End* breaks the fourth wall after reporting the focalizer Margaret's romantic musings: "If you think this ridiculous, remember that it is not Margaret who is telling you about it" [Forster 11]). The fine balance Munro produces in the reader, poised between moral recoil and intimate connection, seems unamenable to cinematic rendering. Even the most obvious candidates, extradiegetic voiceover or adaptation into dialogue, would likely tip the balance too far toward recoil. The unquoted stanza from "Death's Echo" represents a powerful albeit shadowy cue to question Grant's apparent altruism. Certainly Grant does seem like one of Auden's "travellers" whom "malice or circumstance parts / ... from their constant humour" (Auden 152). Though he may fool the audience and even himself about his motives, the poem's allusion to Echo and Narcissus hints that the Other to whom he devotes and sacrifices himself is in fact himself.

Alluding to Narcissus, Auden's poem also joins the daffodil in the film's floral motif, which provides a systemic set of cues warning us against seeing Grant too kindly. The motif represents the expansion and distillation of a more diffuse and variable set of botanical references in Munro's story, which include background vegetation providing atmosphere and symbolic resonance, such as the "swamp-oaks and maples thr[owing] their shadows like bars across the bright now" and "the branches cracking in the cold" (284), but also a more defined set of floral references with clearer symbolic associations: "the perfunctory bouquets of plastic flowers" at Meadowlake (285), and of course Grant's bouquet of daffodils (292). In a particularly telling pun on "flower," then, one of Grant's changing views of Fiona after her relationship with Aubrey sees her touched with "a pallor that was not like cherry blossoms but like *flour* paste" (307, emphasis added).

Unlike Munro, Polley introduces Marian early, in a prolepsis revealing Grant's request that she allow him to reunite Aubrey and Fiona. When Grant knocks at her door, "Marian, an attractive woman in her 60's opens the door. She holds some flowers in her hand, as though she was just about to put them in a vase" (Polley 6.11). The script does not specify but the film shows that the flowers are daffodils, implying that Grant's noble act contains at least a germ of the narcissism that characterizes his character in the story. In the story, Grant and Marian's first meeting is described without mention of flowers; it lingers instead on Marian's vulgarity and age, her "artificially reddened" hair and her "wrinkles made more noticeable by a walnut-stain makeup" (313–14). What is more, Polley juxtaposes the initial meeting with

Marian with a scene showing Fiona at home years earlier, “arrang[ing] wild flowers while Grant makes drinks” (6.12). Similarly, Polley adds clay skunk lilies—a plant with which Fiona is associated from an earlier scene (12.21)—to the decorations on Fiona’s room door at Meadowlake (47.93); Munro has it decorated simply with “Disney birds” (302). In the story, the skunk-lily episode stands alone, and the suggestive fact that “they generated a heat of their own” and that “the heat attracted bugs” (321) encourages less symbolic interpretation than in the film. In the film, the clay flowers on Fiona’s door link her diminished self to an earlier, livelier Fiona who, teaching Grant about skunk lilies, informs him that “Nature doesn’t fool around just being decorative” (13.22; Munro 321). Apparently, based on her use of the floral motif, neither does Sarah Polley.

Polley’s botanical references thematically consolidate and concentrate elements present more diffusely in Munro’s story. In the story, Grant is shocked by a term of endearment Fiona directs at Aubrey, having “never heard her use this flowery expression before” (308); from his alienated response to her uncharacteristic “flowery” language, floral imagery emerges as a potential source of resistance to his predominant norms and perspective. Kristy’s comment about daffodils is, however, the only time Munro clearly exploits this potential. It is a cue at the level of content, alerting readers to the primary site of irony—the discordant narration. Cinematic resistance to such narrational strategies compels Polley to exploit the potential latent in Munro’s use of “flowery” language.

Polley thus retains aspects of Munro’s feminist deflation of Grant’s misogyny and narcissism in the storyworld, not only in the floral motif but also in dialogue, quoted poetry and expanded roles for other, female characters. In Polley’s hands Munro’s irony becomes so subtle that Richard Alleva can be excused for overlooking it when he voices his “only objection to *Away from Her* as an adaptation”: “a certain darkish irony is lost” (Foreword 22). Yet the “darkish irony” remains, though it no longer permeates the narrative presentation; it survives like the things Fiona unaccountably remembers. In her essay on *Away from Her*, Polley explains how her grandmother was similarly prone to uncanny recollection. “The things you remember, not in words but in the very molecules that make up your being, can be more painful than the things that are forgotten” (Foreword xvii). Though Polley’s musings reflect her personal life and recall aspects of Munro’s story emphasized by the film (notably Fiona’s recollections of Grant’s infidelities), they also suggest the traces of the story’s discordant narration that survive its adaptive journey into film.

Conclusion: Adaptation and Narratology

Munro’s peculiar use of discordant narration, so enmeshed with her story’s ethics and politics, in combination with its creative adaptation in *Away from Her*, offers a valuable opportunity to investigate and refine the perennially-debated nature, rhetorical uses and intermedial translatability of discordant narration.

Polley probably did not see her adaptation in such terms, insisting in her essay on the film's genesis that "I am not an academic or a writer (I don't consider the adaptation of other people's stories serious writing)" (Foreword xi). But her self-deprecation belies the creative, technical, interpretive and indeed analytical work manifest in her film's adaptive choices. The way Polley reflects on her "stunned" reaction to the story bespeaks her role as narrative theorist: "'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' raised important questions for me, and I needed to take a good long walk around it and inside it to find out what exactly the natures of those questions were. The way I articulated all of that at the time was simply that I had to make a film out of it" (Foreword xv-xvi). The film helped Polley answer questions Munro's story raised in her; for scholars of adaptation, it might also clarify questions and even suggest answers about the nature, the uses and the cross-medial analogues of discordant narration. Just as experimental poems test and expand the scope and purview of poetics, so do the process and results of adapting a story across media offer opportunities to formulate and test questions about the nature and limitations of narratological concepts and debates.

How a given narrative element crosses medial boundaries can reveal how narrative elements function, both within their specific medial context but also more generally. As Lawrence Venuti argues in "Adaptation, Translation, Critique," the relations that exist between a fiction and its film adaptation are more profitably seen as "hermeneutic" than as "communicative," noting that "the intertextual and intersemiotic relations that a film establishes in adapting prior materials must also be figured into its interrogative potential" (25, 41). The "interrogative potential" of an adaptation like *Away from Her* extends beyond its interpretive, critical and market-driven responses to "The Bear Came over the Mountain": its adaptive work in the context of a given narrative element (here discordance) performs an enquiry into the nature, the uses and the analogues of that element and, more generally, into the workings of narrative both within and across medial boundaries. As Emily Anderson concludes her analysis of mis- and under-reporting in cinematic narration, "the text or message around which a communication model revolves can no longer be defined by literary narrative.... Narrators are different than we thought they were, stranger too, and our theories of them perhaps too limited. Broadening our inquiry ... will encourage us to redefine not only these terms but the terms of narrative theory itself" (102).

The case study examined in this essay highlights how the movement of narratives across medial boundaries could bring into relief—or into question—central interpretive and theoretical issues in narratology. Any adaptation challenges the truism that form is content and content form. Adaptation inevitably modifies aspects of form and/or content, thereby altering their interaction and by extension the meaning of the work. Focussing on the site(s) of this alteration should help theorists answer questions that go beyond the study of adaptation: what happens to content when form changes—and vice versa; and what adaptation's challenges to

the interdependence of form and content reveal about the nature of narrative. Such questions help generate certain testable hypotheses about both adaptation as a process and narratology as a theoretical framework in Adaptation Studies and beyond. In the case of discordant narration, we might thus hypothesize that adaptation should shift cues of authorial irony from narration and discourse into expanded roles for so-called supporting characters as well as non-agential existents in the storyworld (e.g. flowers). More broadly, the medial boundary-crossings of narrative elements—particularly tricky ones like unreliability—represent an underappreciated site for testing and advancing the field of narrative theory and indeed of textual criticism in general.

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End Notes

1. References to Polley's screenplay are formatted as follows: page number: scene number.
2. Munro's story might seem like one of those fictions that do not "generate a fictional narrator" (Köppe and Stühling 62); it could not therefore have an unreliable narrator, just an untrustworthy focalizer or reflector. But the tense and pronouns that differentiate the narrator from Grant are neither neutral nor trivial: there are significant rhetorical differences between a truly first-person account and a third-person account that overlaps perfectly with one focal character's perceptions and thoughts. Consider the following passage in Munro's story, reporting how Grant reacted to Fiona's proposal of marriage when they were young: "He took her up on it, he shouted yes. He wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life" (280). In the film, the narration is adapted into dialogue as Grant recounts the proposal to Kristy in voiceover, romantically transposed over a grainy shot of a young Fiona smiling:

GRANT (V.O.): I took her up on it. I shouted yes.

The 18 year old girl grins. She turns away and looks out at the water, happy.

GRANT (V.O.): I never wanted to be away from her. She had the spark of life. (Polley 1.2)

There is a significant difference between "She had the spark of life" reported by a first-person speaker, as in the film and "She had the spark of life" reported on Grant's behalf by a third-person narrator (Munro 280). In the former it is a romantic, wistful, exposing Grant's vulnerabilities; in the latter it is detached, maybe slightly sarcastic.

3. The film's take on the exchange is less fraught with condescension. Kristy similarly responds to "a charade," asking "A what?," but the scene continues as Grant, without apparent sense of superiority, clarifies:

GRANT: Some kind of act. Maybe a kind of punishment.

Kristy looks at him fondly. Pats his hand.

KRISTY: Now why would she do that. (60.110).

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