



**Queensland University of Technology**  
Brisbane Australia

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## **“The Art of Interpretation: Tracing Logics of Evaluation in Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing* (2000) and Andrew Ruhemann and Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing* (2010).”**

**Erica Hateley, Queensland University of Technology<sup>1</sup>**

Celebration (and the celebritisation) of the Australian-ness of children’s authors who enjoy critical or commercial international success, and especially of those who win international prizes speaks to what James English describes as a desire “both to take national ownership of the local fields of cultural production (to “nationalize” the local culture industries) and to pursue international cultural exchange with a view toward the kinds of symbolic profit that can only be realized outside strictly domestic markets” (English 265-266).

Australian artist and writer Shaun Tan has received a wide array of cultural and literary prizes, in Australia and internationally. Tan’s picture book *The Lost Thing* was first published in 2000, and has since been the source text for a range of adaptations including Lo-Tel’s 2003 album *The Lost Thing*, a stage production by Jigsaw Company (2005), a short animated film in 2010, and the book-film pair is currently the subject of an exhibition at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne. In this paper, I consider two versions of Tan’s *The Lost Thing* in order to consider issues of interpretation, and to suggest that Tan has become increasingly attractive to global tastemakers “as” an Australian artist as his work has become less specifically Australian.

### **Adapting Picture Books?**

Picture books offer particular challenges and opportunities for filmmakers. Perry Nodelman reminds us that in picture books, words and pictures “come together best and most interestingly not when writers and illustrators attempt to have them mirror and duplicate each other but when writers and illustrators use the different qualities of their different arts to communicate different information. When they do that, the texts and illustrations of a book have an ironic relationship to each other: the words tell us what the pictures do not show, and the pictures show us what the words do not tell” (Nodelman 222). Tellingly, Nodelman moves immediately to discuss the semiology of film as described by Christian Metz: a convergence of many systems of signification to produce a coherent aesthetic and/or narrative experience which, *unlike* the picture book, operates simultaneously.

Nodelman’s discussion alerts us to a range of complications for the dominant mode of literature-to-film adaptation studies when not only the filmic text but also the literary text deploys several systems of signification. More concretely, adaptation critic Thomas Leitch has identified a range of “problems in adapting picture books to the screen”:

- The first is the impossibility of translating a child’s private, interactive experience of having a picture book read aloud by a specific reader to cinema, which is restricted to a single, public voice [...]
- the problem of fitting voices to characters without speaking roles in the book [...]

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- A third problem is the need to translate the lines of [a picture book's] drawings into the colored masses of animated cartoons or the three-dimensional space of [...] live-action film. [...]
- A related but distinct problem involves the different depth cues pen-and-ink drawings and movies deploy. This last difference is not between a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional medium [...] but] is more precisely between the ways the two different media conventionally imply a third dimension.
- More fundamental than any of these differences is the problem of translating the discontinuous tableaux of [picture-book] drawings into the continuously streaming images common to cinema. (Leitch 192-193)

In the case of *The Lost Thing*, some of these complications are removed by the fact of one artistic figure producing the words and the pictures for the picture book, and the screenplay and the images for the film. The case of a book creator serving as screenwriter, designer, and co-director on an adaptation of their own work is rare, indeed.

In many discussions or analyses of book/film adaptations, there is still a concern about the prevalence of “fidelity criticism”: the fixation on whether an adaptation is “true” to the essence or spirit of the book on which it based. More fruitful, however, has been the move towards understanding adaptation as a mode of interpretation, not dissimilar from the act of criticism:

Like a critical essay, the film adaptation selects some episodes, excludes others, offers preferred alternatives. It focuses on specific areas of the novel, expands or contracts detail, and has imaginative flights about some characters. In the process, like the best criticism, it can throw new light on the original. (Sinyard 117)

To this I would add that, like the best criticism, the adaptation can also be read as a work on its own terms—a work that may shed light on a pretext, but is also a coherent cultural artefact independent of that pretext.

### Key Sites of Subjective Interpretation in *The Lost Thing*

*The Lost Thing* is a picture book deeply interested in adaptation and interpretation. In a longer version of this paper, I trace the adaptations of figurative expressionist paintings undertaken by Tan within his picture book. However, for reasons of time and because the adaptations of these paintings are absent from the film version, I am focussing here on the ways in which Tan adapts sites and scenes of interpretation from the book to the screen.<sup>2</sup>

*The Lost Thing* is a story told by a narrator relaying an episode from his own boyhood: the finding of a ‘thing’ on the beach. The thing seems intelligent, seems incapable of verbal communication, seems to be alone, seems to be without home, and seems purposeless. The boy decides the thing is “lost”, and sets about finding a permanent and correct place for it. In so doing, the boy navigates a range of domestic, public, and institutional spaces before relocating the thing to a probably permanent home.

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<sup>2</sup> In the film, the two plates of the picture book which adapt Smart and Brack are collapsed into one brief sequence. This moment of adaptation captures the profound aesthetic difference between the extended contemplation invited by paintings and the multi-sensory spectacle invited by narrative film. This should not be understood as an indictment of cinema—it too is capable of “painterly” imagery, and the sustained contemplation of visual images or elements.

Three sites in particular offer interpretive punctuation points in the boy's experiences, and are as dependent on readers looking *with* the boy as looking *at* the boy: the beach, Pete's place, and Utopia.

The beach establishes the ways in which visual interpretation must be undertaken by both the protagonist and the reader. The reader is invited to read the lost thing at the same time as they read the boy attempting to interpret the lost thing. In the four-panel detail of the boy's first encounter with the thing, the reader is offered a range of perspectives on the thing and the boy; using a variety of angles, the first three images show us only partial shots of the thing. Although the two-dimensional conventions of Tan's paintings deny the possibility of seeing all of the lost thing at once, the fourth picture does include full body shots of the boy and the thing equalising them as subject-objects of the reader's gaze.

The visual and verbal texts of this excerpt encourage the reader to align themselves with the boy as narrator and figure of identification, and to question his judgement. The thing may or may not be 'just sitting there', just as it may or may not be lost. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the reader will share the boy's 'bafflement' if this is also their first encounter with the thing.

The experience of Pete's place privileges art, abstraction, and ambiguity. By way of contrast with the boy's own uncertainty, Pete seems to offer a new way of seeing, and he confirms that lostness is possible. Dudek notes the visual links between Pete, his place, and his art and the space within which the lost thing will ultimately be contained; she writes that "Pete's studio, his shirt, even the flesh tone of his body, defy the dun-coloured world around him. He is all brightness and colour. His painting is an abstract composition with squiggled fragments of pinks and yellows and blues" (64). Pete's total lack of engagement with public or shared culture, however, is marked by his (possibly self-imposed) containment within and on his place. An inversion of the beach—a public space where no-one seemed interested in responding to the thing—Pete's place is a private space where attention is paid to the thing, but this attention does not locate the thing in the public or private realms of this society.

Finding a place for the lost thing requires the boy to learn to see the city with new eyes and to seek out marks of previous journeys. He follows curved arrows through the cityscape until he reaches Utopia. In this opening, the graffiti naming the space as Utopia is the only verbal text available; and, significantly, this graffiti both does and does not read "utopia". Boy and reader are confronted with a full bleed (although internally framed) double-page spread that both invites and repels interpretation. Most obviously, the space is filled with creatures like the lost thing insofar as they are unlike each other or anything else the reader has seen in the boy's world.<sup>3</sup> This space might seem to offer the promise of the utopian, but its distinction from the social, public spaces of the narrative's city reminds me of a ghetto rather than of a haven. At the very least, it invites consideration of the slippery distinction between ghetto and haven.

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<sup>3</sup> There are specific references to Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510) which links physical hybridity or abstraction with horror. Tan's references to Bosch may be intended ironically; such a reading would be confirmed by the naming of this Boschian space as "Utopia". Bosch's influence on well-known Surrealists and abstractionists such as Magritte emphasise Utopia's alignment with Pete's art. However, the hellish imagery of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1510) contribute to my ambivalence about accepting this space as utopian. Gombrich notes that Bosch "became famous for his terrifying representations of the powers of evil" (Gombrich 356), and for me, it is difficult to divorce the moral functions from the religious forms in Bosch's work.

While the thing's delivery to utopia seems to offer some closure, it forestalls the boy's development as an interpreter; as the lost thing is absorbed into this realm, the boy begins a long drawn-out divesting of seeing and interpreting. Having found a place for the lost thing, the boy does not, like Pete, retreat to his own ghetto-haven, but the conclusion of his verbal text confirms that he is not an agential subject in public spaces.

As a narrative of interpretation, *The Lost Thing* is a kind of cautionary tale that both values interpretive subjectivity and depicts the consequences of an unthinking or incurious life. The protagonist's consciousness of his and his fellow citizens' failure to interpret their social world—to notice the abstract, the different, or the lost—serves to encourage the reader to continue looking, seeing, and interpreting.

### Interpretation on Screen

I turn now to consider how the film version depicts these narrative sites of interpretation, and what these depictions might reveal about the film's interpretation of the book overall.

At the beach, the film must endow the thing with movement, sound, and a specifically realised bodily mode of intersubjectivity. In short, there needs to be some degree of communication between the boy and the thing. Despite the industrial body-shell and tentacles, the relationship set up here is of a boy and a lost animal in place of the book's ambiguous images the film 'resolves' the lost thing as dog-like; replete with wagging tail.<sup>4</sup>

In the picture book, Pete is an artist. In the film version, Pete is a scientist:  
"Pete didn't know that the thing was, exactly. But he said what he always does: that all physical manifestations could be identified empirically, though careful observation, calibrated measurement, and controlled experimentation."  
(Ruhemann and Tan)<sup>5</sup>

Book Pete seems to offer a different way of looking, film Pete embodies the wider empiricism and rationalism of the boy's culture. Although early sketches for the film adaptation show that Pete's place is filled with paintings, the film itself shows laboratory equipment and reference books.

The failure of techno-science to solve all problems or answer all questions is continuously implied in the picture book by the background collages of clippings from textbooks—made ridiculous by fragmentation, but also made able to produce poetic insight by that same fragmentation and creative juxtaposition between fragments, or of fragments with images. This is not to say that the exploration of art as an alternative to bureaucratic rationalism or techno-babble leads the picture book to a wholesale rejection or endorsement of "art" or "science". What it might help to explain, however, is the explicit foregrounding of 'failed science' in the film version. The film's audience cannot linger over the collages or their significance, so the message must be conveyed another way.

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<sup>4</sup> Tan has described his picture book as "*The Lost Thing*, the story of an unwanted animal lost in a bureaucratic city" (*Bird* 125); where the thing is not necessarily an animal in the picture book—although clearly non-human—but is more obviously coded as an animal in the film by being endowed with traits like those of lost domesticated pets.

<sup>5</sup> At the ACMI 2013 Exhibition there are early sketches by Tan for the film version which clearly show that Pete's place is filled with paintings by Pete.

Just as Utopia in the book offers a very different audience experience than all of the other openings, in the film, the Utopia sequence is very clearly marked as different from the boy's everyday world.

As the door to Utopia opens, the perspective is immediately reversed, so that the viewer is located within utopia itself and is embedded further and further within it as the reverse tracking shot makes utopia expand around the doorway. The viewer is simultaneously removed further and further from sharing the boy's perspective.

As in the book, the depiction of utopia is non-verbal—but the lack of voiceover narration does not mean that the viewer is without narrative or interpretive cues. The musical soundtrack is all whimsy, and the fluid shots which track organic movements within the space. There is nothing overtly threatening about the inhabitants we meet there. There can be little doubt that the thing is going to a 'happy place'. The extent to which such interpretive adaptation shapes likely meaning-making by audiences is confirmed by recent work undertaken by Sandie Mourão who describes her students' reaction to the film version thus:

It was decided that Utopia was definitely a peaceful and happy place, which for some students actually changed their understanding of the story, 'in the illustration in the book I thought the place was not friendly and cosy, but it really is'. (Mourão 97)

Across the film there is a consistent move towards erasing or resolving the interpretive ambiguities which make the book so appealing to me. If I am revealing my disciplinary conditioning here, I presume I'm not the only person in the room who has been trained to value formal experimentation, irony, and ambiguity.

### Reception, Interpretation, Evaluation

Cultural prizing is mode of reception related to but distinct from literary criticism. Remembering James English's point about the pursuit of "international cultural exchange", it seems possible that it is not only the development of Tan's artistic prowess which has garnered him accolades, but a kind of globalising impulse in his more recent work.

In the picture book version of *The Lost Thing*, the primary narrative stages scenes of interpretation while an intertextual cultural narrative—called to the reader's attention by the final page of the story—undertakes interpretation via adaptation of Australian art. More generally, there are the clearly Australian examples of material culture: the streets and street-signs, the beach, the trams. There is also the explicit verbal reference to the "Howard Government" (see Dudek 60). Stephens argues of the book that:

Insofar as these Australian reference points have been reimagined in terms of a postmodern futurism, they suggest that local cultural traits and formations have been subsumed into a global postmodernism. (95)

While I do not share Stephens's confidence in describing the book as postmodern, I do share his confidence that it is a specifically Australian text.

Linda Hutcheon argues that, "There is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves" (Hutcheon 149). I believe that the book is in dialogue first and foremost with Australian society at the turn of the twenty-first century. The film is in dialogue with an audience restricted neither by space nor time. This is neither good nor bad, but strikes me as significant for understanding the film's success.

The film's primary narrative retains the key scenes of interpretation (although as I have argued here, it works to resolve their ambiguities) but mostly erases the narrative about Australian urban environments, politics, or culture. Australian accents remain in the film version—quite literally given the voiceover narration by Tim Minchin—but the specificities of the Australian have been replaced by a more unified or “closed” spectacular text.

While I do not believe that art and film are mutually exclusive, this particular case makes me think of Benjamin's juxtaposition of paintings and films: “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested” (sect. XIV). Current technology allows us easily to arrest a frame of film, however, in the case of the film version of *The Lost Thing*, even frozen, the frames have for me lost the opportunities for contemplation available in the book—both of Tan's original works, and those he adapts.<sup>6</sup>

The film offers great aesthetic pleasure, and Ruhemann and Tan have found a compelling filmic language with which to tell an animated version of *The Lost Thing*. The irony that plagues this film is that in unfixing the characters from static plates to animated movement and sound, it may have fixed the meanings and thus foreclosed interpretation. A further irony can be located in the exponentially international celebration of Tan as an Australian artist as his work becomes less specifically Australian. After all, in 2011, Tan was awarded not only the Dromkeen Medal, which “is made annually to an Australian citizen for a significant contribution to the appreciation and development of children's literature in Australia” (<http://www.scholastic.com.au/common/dromkeen/medal.asp>); not only the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award;<sup>7</sup> but that most coveted and widely-recognised cultural prize: an Academy Award. One of these prizes, and one alone, offers its recipient a truly global currency of recognition and reception.

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<sup>6</sup> My aesthetic concentration on Tan's picture book should make clear that I am not adopting wholesale Benjamin's critique of mechanically reproducible art as lacking aura or authenticity; nor, however, am I confident that the film version of *The Lost Thing* encourages a critical disposition towards itself to the degree that the book does.

<sup>7</sup> “The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (ALMA) is the world's largest award for children's and young adult literature. The award, which amounts to SEK 5 million, is given annually to a single recipient or to several. Authors, illustrators, oral storytellers and those active in reading promotion may be rewarded. The award is designed to promote interest in children's and young adult literature and to strengthen children's rights globally. An expert jury selects the winners from candidates nominated by institutions and organisations worldwide. The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award was founded by the Swedish government in 2002 and is administrated by the Swedish Arts Council.” (<http://www.alma.se/en/About-the-award/>)

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