

# “UNFAITHFULNESS” TO JANE AUSTEN? COMMUNICATING READINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF HER NOVELS THROUGH THEIR FILM ADAPTATIONS

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As Deleyto claims (1991:162), it is through films that most stories are told nowadays. We can add to this statement that it is through films that many literary works are known to popular audiences, millions of people, throughout the world. One of the British authors whose works have been adapted to the big screen is Jane Austen. These Hollywood film adaptations have been released in cinemas worldwide and have contributed to the cultural and literary exchange between English speaking countries and the rest of the globe, including continental Europe. In this paper, we will focus on two adaptations of Austen’s novels: *Clueless*, an update of *Emma* directed by Amy Heckerling in 1995, and *Mansfield Park*, directed in 1999 by Patricia Rozema. These films challenge the traditional notion of fidelity and have been considered by many Austen’s devotees to be radical and “unfaithful” deviations from the original texts. However, if we go beyond this notion, these films can be analysed as individual works of art which weave together several prior texts and several interpretations and readings of the novels.

## NEW WAYS OF APPROACHING FILM ADAPTATIONS. ADAPTATION AS “INTERTEXTUAL DIALOGISM”

As Naremore (2000:2) claims, most discussions of film adaptation can be summarized by a *New Yorker* cartoon that Alfred Hitchcock once described to François Truffaut: two goats are eating a pile of film cans, and one goat says to the other. “Personally, I liked the book better.” This cartoon serves to illustrate the idea

traditionally held in discussions of film adaptation, which led to what is known as “fidelity analysis”, a type of analysis in which the source text is considered to be the basis from which the adaptation should be approached. In this model, the adaptation is a copy whose value is measured in terms of its fidelity to the original text. In Naremore’s words (2000:2), this type of criticism tends to be inherently respectful to the “precursor text”, and is in favour of “a series of binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy.” This author asserts that the writing about adaptation should provide a more flexible, animating discourse in film studies. Therefore, we should foster the development of new approaches to film adaptation.

One of these new ways of approaching an adaptation is the model proposed by Stam (2000), which studies adaptation as intertextual dialogism, emphasizing the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture and the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated. This author maintains that our statements about films based on novels or other sources should be more rooted in contextual and intertextual history, and less concerned with notions of “fidelity”. We should give more attention to dialogical responses, that is, to readings, critiques, interpretations and rewritings of prior material (Stam 2000:64,75,76).

According to Stam (2000:54), the language of criticism dealing with the film adaptation of novels has often been profoundly moralistic. This can be observed in the terms which have been used to describe the relationship between the adaptation and the original text: “terms such as infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration, each accusation carrying its specific charge of outraged negativity.” Stam’s purpose is to move beyond a moralistic approach and to offer specific strategies for the analysis of a film adaptation.

In order to achieve this, first of all he analyses the issue of fidelity to the original. In his opinion, the notion of fidelity is problematic for several reasons (Stam 2000:55-56):<sup>1</sup> 1) The possibility of strict fidelity to the original is questionable, since an adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium. 2) Apart from the shift from a single-track, verbal, medium, to a multi-track medium such as film, there are other aspects which make fidelity to the original virtually impossible. The demand for fidelity seems to ignore the processes which take place during the production of a film. A film differs from a novel in cost

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<sup>1</sup> The assumptions upon which fidelity analysis is based are also summarized by Berghahn (1996), who shows how these assumptions are problematic and erroneous and, therefore, cannot serve as the basis for the analysis of film adaptations. This type of analysis is also questioned by Helman and Osadnik (1996) who claim how in film history we can find many examples of good adaptations which have not been faithful to the original.

and in the modes of production. 3) Moreover, Stam considers that the notion of “fidelity” is essentialist in relation to both media involved because it assumes that a novel contains an extractable essence, an originary core, a kernel of meaning that can be transmitted by an adaptation. But this author believes that, in fact, there is no such transferable core, since a novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings: “The literary text is not a closed, but an open structure (...) to be reworked by a boundless context. The text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation.” (Stam 2000:57)

In order to support his ideas, Stam makes use of structuralist and poststructuralist thinking, represented by important figures such as Bakhtin, Foucault, Derrida and Barthes. Their theoretical contributions undermine the idea of the superiority of literature over film. With poststructuralist theory the figure of the author loses focus: “And if authors are fissured, fragmented, multidiscursive, hardly “present” even to themselves, how can an adaptation communicate the “self-presence” of authorial intention?” (Stam, 2000:57-58)

Stam reminds us that not only film has used other media or genres as sources. This process, which he calls “cannibalization”, can also be found in novels:

Both novel and film have consistently cannibalized other genres and media (...) But the cinema carries this cannibalization to its paroxysm. As a rich, sensorially composite language characterized by what Metz calls “codic heterogeneity,” the cinema becomes a receptacle open to all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all types of collective representation, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite plays of influence within cinema, within the other arts, and within culture generally. (Stam 2000:61)

If, as Stam has proved, “fidelity” is an inadequate trope to refer to a film adaptation, other tropes should be used. As this author explains, the theory of adaptation has available many other tropes: “translation, reading, dialogization, cannibalization, transmutation, transfiguration, and signifying – each of which sheds light on a different dimension of adaptation” (2000:62). However, Stam proposes to consider adaptation as “Intertextual Dialogism”:

An adaptation, in this sense, is less an attempted resuscitation of an originary work than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process. The concept of intertextual dialogism suggests that every text forms an intersection of textual surfaces. All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and conflations and inversions of other texts. In the broadest sense, intertextual dialogism refers to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, which reach the text not only through recognizable influences, but also through a subtle process of dissemination. (Stam 2000:64)

In relation to the process of intertextuality, Stam refers to Bakhtin's dialogism and to Gérard Genette's term "transtextuality" as useful concepts for the analysis of film adaptations (Stam 2000: 64-66). He claims that our analysis of film adaptations should be less moralistic and more rooted in contextual and intertextual history, giving more attention to dialogical responses, that is, to readings, critiques, interpretations, and rewritings of prior material. A type of analysis which not only recognises but also celebrates the differences between the media (Stam 2000:75-76).

Taking into account the previous ideas, the main aim of this paper is to prove that new ways of approaching the analysis of adaptations, such as the one proposed by Stam, offer the possibility to move beyond fidelity analysis. To achieve this purpose, I will focus on two recent adaptations of Jane Austen's novels:<sup>2</sup> *Clueless*, an update of *Emma* directed by Amy Heckerling in 1995, and *Mansfield Park*, directed in 1999 by Patricia Rozema. These films have been considered by many Austen's devotees to be radical and "unfaithful" deviations from the original texts and, therefore, challenge the traditional notion of fidelity. However, if we go beyond this notion, we can analyse these films as individual works of art which weave together not only several prior texts but also several interpretations and readings of the novels.

*Clueless* brings the story of *Emma* into the high school culture of the 1990s in Los Angeles. Stern (2000:225) explains how in the film "Los Angeles is figured not simply as an imitation or deviation from Highbury, but rather as an intertextual site spun by the movies, television series, MTV, and a variety of remakes and adaptations." I will analyse how this film brings together different texts and discourses, and how it deconstructs traditional oppositions such as novel vs cinema, high vs mass culture, etc.

Rozemas's *Mansfield Park* has been described by Johnson (1999) as "a stunning revisionist reading of Austen's darkest novel." In an interview in which Rozema talks to Berardinelli (1999), the film director describes her adaptation of the novel as a "collage" which tries to be an accurate portrait of Austen and her work. From my point of view, this collage is created through an intertextual play between different interpretations and readings of Austen's life and works, not only

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen's novels have been the source not only of films for the big screen but also of several BBC and ITV television series. The boom of adaptations of her novels in the 1990's has been known as Austenmania. Apart from *Clueless* and *Mansfield Park*, other five adaptations of her novels were released in the 1990's: *Persuasion* (1995), first released in TV; the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (1995); the Hollywood movie *Sense and Sensibility* (1995); two adaptations of *Emma* (1996), one produced by Miramax and the other produced by *Britain's Meridian Broadcasting* for the ITV. Several critical studies have been devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon in the last years: Troost and Greenfield (eds.) (1998); Wiltshire (2001); Parrill (2002); McDonald and McDonald (eds.) (2003).

of her novels but also of her minor works known as *The Juvenilia*, written between 1787 and 1795.

### CLUELESS (1995)

A Paramount production, *Clueless* was directed by Amy Heckerling and released in 1995. This film transfers the story of Austen’s novel *Emma* to a different time and place.<sup>3</sup> The action takes place in Los Angeles in the 1990’s. The main character, Cher, is a teenager who belongs to the American high class society.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence of this “modernisation”, the film seems to have nothing to do with Austen’s novel. In fact, the names of the characters are different to those in the novel, and the way these American teenagers speak seems to be pretty far from the English used by *Emma*’s characters. However, people who have read the novel will be able to find parallels between the story written by Austen and the one told in *Clueless*. Philips and Heal (1999) claim that the process through which Heckerling adapts the events which appear in the novel is similar to an “alphabet puzzle approach”:

Heckerling has created what we would like to term an “alphabet puzzle approach” to her treatment of plot in adapting *Emma* (...). Events in the story are divided up and rearranged in a kind of image anagram for the *Emma*-familiar viewer to solve. To locate themes parallel to those in *Emma*, viewers must rearrange some events to master the puzzle. (Philips and Heal 1999:3)

Making a detailed analysis of the film, we discover that most of the characters are based upon characters in the novel, and that many scenes have their origin in episodes in the novel, passed through the filter of modernisation.<sup>5</sup>

In the first scenes of the movie, Cher’s voice-over addresses the audience: “But seriously I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I mean I get up, I brush my teeth and I pick up my clothes.” Cher’s words try to persuade the viewers not to jump to conclusions about the images they have just seen. These images, accompanied by the song “Kids in America” can be compared to a video-clip and

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<sup>3</sup> *Emma* was published in 1816.

<sup>4</sup> According to Stern (2000:229), the modernisation of Austen’s story in Heckerling’s films can be seen as a process of “Los Angelesization and teenification”.

<sup>5</sup> It is probably surprising to discover that this update of *Emma* succeeds in transmitting, through the audiovisual codes and techniques, many features of the novel’s verbal narration, as the narrator’s irony. Nachumi (1998) states that *Clueless* is the adaptation which finds the best cinematic solution to adapt the irony that characterises Austen’s narrator: “(...) the solution achieved by *Clueless* –a solution which foregrounds the incongruity between the film’s visual and verbal elements– is the solution that comes closest to replicating Austen’s ironic narrator. (Nachumi 1998:130).

offer several fragments of the protagonist's life, introducing Cher's way of life: a high class teenager who does not have any problem to worry about.<sup>6</sup>

Deleyto (2003) analyses the boom of the teenpic in the last years of the second millennium, showing that teenagers were a clear target of the film industry at the end of the twentieth century. He explains that the films of this genre released during these years appeal not only to teenagers but also to an adult audience. For instance, he refers to those films for teenagers which are loose adaptations of classic works of literature such as *Clueless* (1995), *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996), *Cruel Intentions* (1999), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) and *O* (2001) (Deleyto 2003:210).

In Deleyto's view (2003:218), *Clueless*'s cultural significance lies, on the one hand, in its status as a film which is representative of the conventions followed by teenpics in the 1990s and, on the other hand, in its ability to relate the present to the past, through the rewriting of Jane's Austen historical and social universe in the world of a Beverly Hills high school at the end of the millennium.<sup>7</sup>

This rewriting and update of Austen's novel can be found in the very title of the film. At the end of the movie (01:14:22), Cher realises that she has been completely *clueless*: "Everything I think and everything I do is wrong. I was wrong about Elton. I was wrong about Christian. Now Josh cheated me. It all boils down to one inevitable conclusion: I was just totally *clueless*." (My emphasis)

The film's title refers to the central trait of the protagonist, a trait which is shared with the main character of the novel: the fact that they perceive reality in a wrong way because they see the world surrounding them not as it is but as they want it to be. In the novel, Emma discovers that she has been "blind" and "universally mistaken". Cher's expression, *clueless*, serves to express the same

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<sup>6</sup> Stern (2000) analyses the movie's first images. There is a clear contrast between the lyrics of the song and the images we see. Although the song declares that these are "Kids in America", the images offer us a particular kind of America and a particular kind of kids:

To a certain extent, of course, these images are 'way normal'; even if we live on the wrong side of the tracks or in Australia, we recognize this LA as a metonymic of movie-made America, we are familiar with all the jokes about West Coast culture, and we recognize Beverly Hills as a very privileged, albeit often tacky, enclave of LA (normalized if not by the movies, then by television, by shows such as *Beverly Hills 90210*). Cher is truly a child of Hollywood, her mother having died in "a fluke accident during a routine liposuction," and her conception of the Beverly center as *the* center of the world serves as an index of Hollywood's imperialism (...) (Stern 2000:233).

<sup>7</sup> Sonnet (1999:51) also claims that *Clueless* belongs to the teenpic genre which had its origins in the mid-1950s: "As a portrait of contemporary youth culture, *Clueless* has its literary and filmic antecedents in the critically despised 'teenpic' genre that emerged in the mid-1950s as a result of the fragmentation of mass cinema audiences into age-specific consumer groups."

idea. The novel’s language has also been passed through the filter of modernisation. It has also been “rewritten”.

The intertextuality of *Clueless* has been pointed out by Stern (2000:225): “Through certain remaking strategies –a consciousness of intertextuality if you like– LA materializes in the film as a particularly interesting configuration of spatial and cultural tropes.” This author thinks that the movie not only uses Jane Austen’s novel as a source, but it offers many other contemporary allusions:

Clearly *Clueless* appeals to different audiences who bring to the movie different knowledge and expectations, but what makes it particularly fascinating is that it actually assumes, through the heterogeneity of its references and allusions, that quotidian knowledge is informed by and woven out of a diversity of cultural practices – not distinguishable according to “high” and “low” markers (...). Although it is certainly not necessary to be familiar with *Emma* in order to enjoy *Clueless*, my argument is that it is the spirit and operation of remaking that serves to generate and sustain the movie’s intricate network of relations – between different texts, different media, different cultural signs and temporalities. (Stern 2000:225-226)

This author stresses that the modernity of the film derives from the generic choices made by Heckerling: “Most simply, her choice was to turn an early nineteenth-century comedy of manners into a late twentieth-century teen movie.” (Stern 2000:226)

To finish with the analysis of this film, I will focus on a scene which does not appear in Austen’s novel, and which directly alludes to the film adaptations of literary works.<sup>8</sup> Cher is sitting in Josh’s car.<sup>9</sup> Josh’s girlfriend is also in the car. She is speaking about literature and Cher takes part in the conversation to correct a statement made by Josh’s girlfriend about *Hamlet* (00:42:12):

Josh’s girlfriend: “It’s just Hamlet said *to thine own self be true.*”

Cher: “No, Hamlet didn’t say that.

Josh’s girlfriend: I think that I remember Hamlet accurately.

Cher: I remember Mel Gibson accurately. He didn’t say that. That Polonius guy did.”

Josh laughs, approving Cher’s words. Meanwhile, his girlfriend seems to feel embarrassed by the fact that someone like Cher, who seems to be interested only in shopping and stupid books, has been able to correct her. Although Cher’s knowledge of *Hamlet* has not been acquired through a reading of Shakespeare’s

<sup>8</sup> Apart from this reference to a film adaptation, there are other references to films in this movie, like the use of *Gigi*’s soundtrack and of Strauss music for the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

<sup>9</sup> Josh is the son of Cher’s father’s ex-wife, and can be considered a parallel of *Emma*’s Mr. Knightley.

play but through watching the film based upon it and directed by Zeffirelli in 1991, with Mel Gibson in the leading role, the truth is that she is capable of adding precision to the words of someone who prides herself on being an expert on Shakespeare's work. This is a proof that the film adaptations of classic literary works serve to bring these works to an audience which is not used to reading them. This scene also serves to deconstruct notions such as high vs. mass culture or novel vs. cinema. As Steiner claimed in a lecture delivered at Oxford University:

A poem, a play, a novel can never be separated altogether from the illustrations or other pieces of art which it inspires, from its settings to music, from the films, radio-versions, television treatments which are based on it. Roman Jakobson called this motion of a text across other media 'transmutations'. (...) Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff* have a close, as it were exponential relation to the understanding of Shakespeare in late-romantic Europe. The lives of *Hamlet* are also those of the very different operas, films, paintings, even ballets which the play has generated. (...) Today, exact technical reproducibility, electronic encoding and transmission, and, before long, the graphic-aural technologies of 'virtual reality' will bear, in ways nearly unpredictable, on the reception of language and of language in literature. (Steiner 1995:16)

### *MANSFIELD PARK* (1999)

The most recent period adaptation of a Jane Austen's novel is *Mansfield Park* (1999),<sup>10</sup> directed by Patricia Rozema, who was also responsible for the adapted screenplay.<sup>11</sup> What is surprising about this screenplay is the fact that, when she was writing it, Rozema not only used Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, but also her letters and early journals or works, which are known as *The Juvenilia*. Rozema has described her screenplay as a "collage" which tries to be an accurate portrait of Austen and her work (Berardinelli 1999). My aim is to show how this notion of "collage" can be related to Stam's idea of "Intertextual Dialogism".

The elements which Rozema introduces from Austen's letters and early works explain many of the changes the film presents in relation to the novel. These changes largely affect the main character in the novel, Fanny Price, who in the film is completely transformed, becoming a mixture of the biographical Jane Austen, in

<sup>10</sup> *Mansfield Park* was published in 1814.

<sup>11</sup> It should be mentioned here that what can be considered a loose adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* was released in 2004. I refer to the film *Bride and Prejudice*, which can be considered a *Bollywood* update of Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice* by the director Gurinder Chadha. The release of a new adaptation of the same novel, directed by Joe Wright and starring Keira Knightley, has been announced to take place in 2005.



particular, the Jane Austen who wrote *The Juvenilia*, and the narrator of *Mansfield Park*, whose functions are fulfilled by Fanny in the movie. The film plays with the narrative levels, something which is evidenced in several scenes in which Fanny acts as intradiegetic narrator, telling stories that she has written. These stories can be traced to *Henry and Eliza* and *The History of England*, which are two of Austen's early works. In the novel, Fanny is not the writer presented in the film. The description of Fanny's style of writing as “wild”, made by Edmund in the movie,<sup>12</sup> can be compared to what critics think about Jane Austen's *Juvenilia*.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from using Austen's diaries and early works, the intertextuality of this adaptation is evidenced by several scenes and dialogues which cannot be found in the novel, and whose addition can be explained by the critical readings Rozema made of Jane Austen's works and particularly of *Mansfield Park*, which find in this novel an implicit criticism of slavery in the British colonies and the condition of women in her time. In addition to the changes related to thematic elements, Rozema introduces in the film other changes and additions to the events and episodes taking place in the novel. The most important change takes place when Fanny and Henry are walking along Portsmouth's harbour, followed by her sister Susan and one of her younger brothers (01:12:22). During the walk, Fanny accepts Henry's proposal of marriage. However, during the night, Fanny awakes, frightened and worried (01:14:10). The following morning, Henry arrives at the Price's house with a bunch of flowers for Fanny, but she has decided to reject Henry (01:14:43): “I've anguished over the matter and I feel that I cannot...I cannot marry you. I'm not prepared.”

In the novel, Fanny never accepts Henry Crawford's proposal. The change introduced by Rozema can be probably based on a real event which happened to the real Jane Austen. She accepted the marriage proposal of Harris Biggs, the younger brother of her friends, the Biggs sisters, but she rejected him the next day. This episode is narrated by Tomalin (1997:181) in her biography of the British novelist. It is possible that among the readings Rozema made to prepare the adaptations, there were biographies or articles which mentioned this event in Austen's life.

The real Jane Austen finally rejected Biggs's proposal because she was not in love with him as she had been in love with Tom Lefroy, a young Irish man. In the

<sup>12</sup> In the film (00:14:58), Edmund describes Fanny's style of writing with the following words:

Edmund: “My gift is nothing next to yours. My writing is wood compared to your wild constructions.”

Fanny: “Yes, I'm a wild beast. I'm sure Sir Thomas would agree.”

<sup>13</sup> In 1925, Virginia Woolf made reference to the satire and humour which can be found in Austen's early works. She describes *Love and Friendship*, one of the stories in *The Juvenilia*, as “an astonishing an unchildish story”, which was “spirited, easy, full of fun verging with freedom upon sheer nonsense”. (Woolf 1925:134-135)

movie, Fanny also realises that although Henry means a world of security, he cannot marry a man she does not love. In a letter, Jane Austen gave an advice about marriage to one of her nieces: “Never marry without affection”. This advice, which she followed in her own life, has been highlighted by Rozema in her film through the changes mentioned above.

Throughout this paper, it has been proved that the definition the director gives of her adaptation as a collage of Austen and her work is certainly justified. A collage is something made by combining and mixing many different things. And Rozema’s movie is the result of this process of combination. This is clearly exemplified in the scene when Edmund discusses with his brother what a good drama must be (00:24:58): “Good drama, in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most direct knowledge of human nature, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world through the best chosen language.”

The good connoisseur of Austen’s work would soon discover that these words belong not to *Mansfield Park* but to her novel *Northanger Abbey*, where they belong to the narrator’s discourse and refer to the characteristics of a good novel.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Rozema is again using elements from different sources to complete her movie. As Claudia L. Johnson claims: “Finally a director has taken risks with Austen, treating her work not as a museum piece or as a sacred text but as a living presence whose power inspires flight”. These words take us back to intertextuality. The “flight” inspired by the novel may well refer to the multiple readings, interpretations and adaptations of the original text.

## CONCLUSION

As the analysis of *Clueless* and *Mansfield Park* has tried to prove, the traditional notion of fidelity to the original text should be reconsidered. New ways of approaching the analysis of adaptations, such as the one proposed by Stam, offer the possibility to move beyond fidelity analysis. This new approach does not claim that we should forget the original text but it enriches the study of adaptations,

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<sup>14</sup> These are the words appearing in *Northanger Abbey*:

“And what are you reading, Miss — ?” “Oh! It is only a novel!” replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame.—“It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;” or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. (NA p. 38)

favouring an analysis which takes into account all the texts, readings, and interpretations which feed the adaptation. The two films we have chosen to illustrate this new approach differ considerably in the way they adapt the original work. While *Clueless* is an update of *Emma*, *Mansfield Park* is a period film. However, they coincide in the way they participate in an intertextual play. These films show new ways of adapting that ask for new ways of approaching adaptations. At the same time, the intertextual play pierces the screen and brings these interpretations and rewritings of the two English novels to audiences in cinemas all through the world, communicating a particular experience of the novels and provoking new experiences which will enrich and contribute to the process of “intertextual dialogism”.

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